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# Too Terrible to Relate: Dynamic Trauma in the Novels of Toni Morrison

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ABSTRACT

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TOO TERRIBLE TO RELATE: DYNAMIC TRAUMA IN THE NOVELS  
OF TONI MORRISON

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This study examines fictional representations of trauma as reflected in Toni Morrison's novels *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*. By utilizing the theoretical modes of new historicism and trauma theory, the veil of double consciousness is explicated. The modes also help to expose the climate of trauma in the novels which produce various forms of dysfunction in the individual and the community. The unspoken atrocities experienced as a result of slavery, Jim Crow, and physical and sexual violence in many of Morrison's novels suggest the common thread of trauma in the lives of the characters who experience similar events in Morrison's stories. The particular traumas depicted in Morrison's novels, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*, damage agency, leading to detachment and paralysis in the individual. The scope of this study is limited to the novels *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* as they best illustrate trauma in Morrison's characters and the damage that the pathology causes to agency, leading to detachment and paralysis in general.

TOO TERRIBLE TO RELATE: DYNAMIC TRAUMA IN THE NOVELS  
OF TONI MORRISON

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

COREY STAYTON

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

One of the primary aims of Toni Morrison's novels is to reconnect African Americans to the often horrific histories of their past that have often either been co-opted by dominant white discourse or, worse yet, ignored altogether by literary and historical accounts. In *The Site of Memory*, Morrison makes it clear as a writer that she sees herself as one who should relate the difficult, innermost feelings of African Americans: "My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" (70). The veil that she refers to is described in Dubois' *Souls of Black Folk* where he suggests that African Americans have a double consciousness—one consciousness is how African Americans see themselves, and another consciousness is how the dominant White culture sees African Americans. This double consciousness illustrates the traumatic experience of racism: "...the Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, gifted with second-sight in the American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world (9). Dubois goes further to say, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (9). The metaphoric veil of double consciousness represents the covering up of an African-American traumatic past which has yet to be unashamedly revealed. The purpose of this study is to show how "Dynamic

Trauma” is illustrated in the selected novels of Toni Morrison and how it damages agency, resulting in detachment and paralysis in the individual, as well as the inability of the individual to construct rational and balanced narratives of self. The unspoken atrocities experienced as a result of slavery, racial discrimination, physical and sexual violence are re-enacted in many of Morrison’s novels to suggest a common thread of trauma in the lives of many African Americans. The scope of this study is limited to fictional representations of trauma in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* as these particular novels best illustrate Morrison’s exploration of the common threads of trauma and what I distinctly name in the study as “Dynamic Trauma.” Dynamic Trauma is a crippling disablement through which trauma metastasizes into areas of physiological and psychological spaces in the individual.

The double consciousness of the veil that Dubois discusses is a symptom of trauma and also the acceptance and validation of what George Yancy calls in his book, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*, the “white gaze.” The “white gaze” is often described as looking at the world from a eurocentric cultural perspective. This view or gaze, as it is called, regards the world from a narrowly centered cultural perspective in which non-whites are often marginalized, altogether invisible, or omitted from authorial space. It renders African Americans as objects rather than subjects. More importantly, the gaze forces African Americans to see themselves outside of themselves; it is insight into how a white hostile world sees them and uses that perspective to construct a false sense of identity for African Americans. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*, Yancy gives an example of the effects of the white gaze using an encounter he has on an elevator with a white woman:



I feel trapped. I no longer feel bodily expansive within the elevator, but corporeally constrained, limited. I now begin to calculate, paying almost neurotic attention to my body movement, making sure that this 'Black object' what now feels like an appendage, a weight is not too close, not too tall, not too threatening. Double layers of self-awareness must interrogate the likely meanings that will be attributed to every utterance, gesture, action one takes...My lived-body comes back to me, as does the elevator in the example above, as something to be dealt with, as a challenge. The gaze of the woman disrupts my habituated bodily comportment and I am thrown into an uncomfortable awareness of my body. (15)

Yancy's description of how the white gaze strips an individual of subjectivity and posits a view of the individual unknown to him or herself also confirms the continued use of the double consciousness motif. The white gaze splits the objective self from the subjective self in a way that makes identity construction difficult at best.

Morrison makes clear in her own writings that she is attempting to construct narratological accounts of African-American lives that have been underrepresented and often untold. She places African Americans at the center of their own stories without the interruption of the white gaze. In this way, Morrison unveils the traumatic past of African Americans. She does this by depicting the interior lives of African Americans within a historical and narratological context. The fact that Morrison describes the horrors of slavery as "too terrible to relate" points to the premise of this study. The traumatic effects produced by racism through the ineffable experience of slavery and

discrimination disrupt the ability to render a narrative reflective of the self. These underrepresented and often untold stories reveal pathological trauma accepted as normal in the African-American community. The normalization of psychological trauma often leads to psychological paralysis and detachment. These untold stories expose the dynamics of trauma exhibited in the individual that have often been ignored or seen as a normal part of life.

Cathy Caruth, J. Brooks Bouson, Allen Young, and other scholars have examined the existence of traumatic experience(s) and how they are illustrated in the works of Morrison with the focus often on a solitary traumatic experience and its specific effects, whether sexual, physical, or other. These scholars examine the various characteristics and formulations of trauma in literary works. In Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, she underscores the importance of the relationship between historical narrative and experiences of trauma. Allen Young's *Bodily Memory and Traumatic Memory* explores the specific ways in which trauma is imprinted on the individual not only psychologically, but physiologically as well. J. Brooks Bouson's *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* defines and discusses the existence of communal trauma and its effect. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber's *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* along with other notable scholars apply these trauma theories to specific events and individuals to illustrate the presence of trauma in Morrison's works. This study synthesizes those previous formulations of traumatic experiences and their residual effects, and affirms that whether it is a singular, specific traumatic event, cultural/communal trauma, or multiple traumatic events, the trauma, after prolonged presence, metastasizes in the individual causing wide-

ranging problems. Consequently, these trauma characteristics leave the individual detached and unable to construct identity or a narrative reflective of self, a psychological state which is defined in this study as Dynamic Trauma.

### **Chapter Organization**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter one provides an analysis of the African and African-American cultural experience of racism through enslavement and discrimination, which is critical to understanding the intellectual void that Morrison's novels seek to fill. It also presents a useful background to later discussions and analyses of trauma which are central to the study. This chapter also explores a definition of dynamic trauma which is used throughout this study.

Chapter two establishes the theoretical framework for the study. This chapter examines trauma theory and New Historicism and how these theories provide an approach through which to read Morrison's novels; the theories also support the idea that dynamic trauma damages agency. This chapter also examines the effects of dynamic trauma, specifically its effect on identity. The chapter discusses the capacity and purpose of trauma and their impact on identity and how victims become paralyzed and detached from themselves and the community.

In chapter three, dynamic trauma and its damaging effects are explicated through an analysis of the novel *Sula*. Traumatic experiences and their effects are examined in all of the female characters, the destruction of the Bottom, Chicken Little's death and the death of Sula's mother. The structure of the novel will also be examined as exhibiting signs of trauma. All of these novels illustrate the debilitating effects of dynamic trauma.

In chapter four, dynamic trauma in Morrison's novel, *Song of Solomon*, is examined. To some varying degree, the effects of dynamic trauma are similar to the effects exhibited in *Sula*. The characters suffer from traumatic experiences that continue to grow in the individual and isolate them from community. As a result, the characters become stunted in their growth—they do not develop a healthy sense of self and their traumatic experiences often torment them. The characters suffer anguish and torment until they are either psychologically destroyed, or they ultimately acknowledge and overcome their traumatic experiences by being able to reconstruct or create an empowering and complete narrative. The novel does, however, offer some possible strategies to move beyond trauma. Characters such as Pilate Dead are able to construct an identity that is not destructive but rather reflective of her individuality.

Chapter five examines dynamic trauma in the novel *Beloved*. Here, the impact of trauma on identity is distinctly clear as the traumatic experience is passed on from generation to generation and many of the characters are isolated from one another and unable to move beyond their traumatic experience. Sweet Home—the place where an initial traumatic event occurs—is significant as it suggests the important relationship between place and experience. Sweet home in any other context should conjure images of a safe place where one is nurtured and connected to others through communal and familial ties. In *Beloved* Sweet Home is the opposite. It is a dangerous place where people are stripped of their connections—another example of the insidious nature of trauma.

Chapter six asserts that Morrison offers a possible remedy for traumatic experience—acceptance without acquiescence. In *Beloved*, it is clear that Morrison seems

to point to a way to move beyond traumatic experience which is not necessarily observed in *Sula* or *Song of Solomon*. Through the assistance and intervention of the community, in the form of testimonials and the prayer circle, Morrison draws on the transformative power of storytelling. At the conclusion of the novel, Sethe is able to tell her story to someone—the prayer circle—and unload her burdening disordered psychic state. Reconnecting the individual and the community serves as a method to move beyond the traumatic experience. This chapter also argues that while recovery from dynamic trauma may not be possible, the reconstruction of a healthy self-image, which includes the ability to remember and tell stories, may be used to move beyond traumatic experiences.

I expand the critical discussion of Morrison's work by examining the particular damage that dynamic trauma has on her characters' abilities to connect with community and the sense of self. As illustrated in the novels examined in this study, traumatic experiences negatively affect identity construction. In *Sula*, for example, Shadrack has difficulty piecing himself together after coming back from his traumatic experience during World War II. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead Jr. has difficulty moving beyond his father's murder which renders him psychologically paralyzed and stuck in his particular experience, doomed to repeat the traumas of his father's experience. In *Beloved*, Sethe's experience of infanticide creates a dynamic trauma that promises to consume her, first as spirit, and later as flesh. Sethe is consumed by the spirit of her baby as it haunts her and the house on Bluestone Road. Eventually, her dead child physically manifests and continues to consume Sethe, further depleting her physical and mental strength. Thus Sethe lacks the ability to see or move beyond the unspeakable acts and reconstruct her identity and the world around her through narrative discourse. As a

result, she retreats inward and away from community. I conclude that dynamic trauma leads to the destruction of agency and the inability to construct a sense of identity that ultimately leaves one paralyzed—stunted in human development—as well as detached from self and community. This study defines and examines dynamic trauma and its psychological and physiological effects as portrayed in selected novels of Toni Morrison. I outline the debilitating effects of trauma that lead to the damaged agency of specific Morrisonian characters. Whether Shadrack in *Sula*, Macon Dead Jr. in *Song of Solomon* or Sethe in *Beloved*, each character suffers from dynamic trauma, and consequently finds themselves psychologically and physiologically unable to connect to a sense of self and to others. They lose the ability to create healthy narratives of self, which has been disrupted by trauma.

Theories on trauma and the theory of New Historicism are critical in establishing a useful understanding, not only of the characters in Morrison's novels but also how her characters function in crises and are representative of the lives of African Americans and their communities. It should be clear that while these are fictional characters, there is a benefit to applying trauma theory to them as it reveals how trauma affects African Americans in real situations. According to Joanna Jeskova's dissertation, *The Interiority and Communal Integration of Trauma in Toni Morrison's Beloved*, "...psychoanalysis is only one approach to understanding the characters in this novel, but that the abundant similarities between the characters' behaviors and various elements of trauma symptoms are particularly valuable for understanding the contours of former slaves' interior lives"

(2). The theoretical approaches applied in this study (trauma theory and New Historicism) provide a psychoanalytic and historical framework from which to examine

the interior lives of African Americans as portrayed in fiction. Jeskova underscores the connection between fictional characters and real people.

Trauma theory is critical to this study because it provides a window into the interior of Morrison's characters and their reactions to trauma, and consequently may provide an understanding of the lives of African Americans. Trauma theory is critical to this study because much of what is experienced in real life, whether it is slavery, discrimination, or sexual violence, all have psychological effects on the human experience. Trauma theory helps to underscore this impact and, to some extent, demonstrates how the mind negotiates these traumatic experiences. This theory examines the deeper psychological implications of the external realities of racism presented in the texts. These deeper psychological implications, including isolation and the dialectic of trauma, illustrate the insidious and metastatic nature of traumatic experiences on individuals and communities in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*. These effects leave individuals detached, paralyzed, and unable to render a substantive account of selfhood. In Morrison's fiction, detachment in the individual takes shape through isolation from the community and the self. The individual is viewed as being outside of the community or perhaps the individual has difficulty recognizing his or her own body parts as his or her own. Paralysis occurs in the individual when the individual is unable to move beyond the traumatic experience. The individual is essentially stuck in the horrific experience, repeatedly revisiting the event. The trauma, if not addressed, metastasizes into other physiological and psychological areas of the individual to the point that the individual loses the ability to achieve agency and construct an identity beyond the traumatic experience.

New Historicism is a useful theoretical tool in this study as it reconnects one with experience through the telling of stories and concentrates on the importance of speakers in the text and how they become agents of truth. So often, the historical narratives of slavery and African Americans have been told from a eurocentric perspective, or the narratives of African Americans are subjected to validation by white authors. This suggests that slave narratives are, in some way, inauthentic in their accounts. The detailed, horrible truth of what enslaved Africans witnessed and experienced was omitted from their stories in an attempt to fit their narratives into a white, master narrative that could be published and tolerated at the expense of an authentic African-American authorial voice. New Historicism treats all cultural perspectives as equally important and, therefore, lends credibility to narratives often marginalized or omitted from public discourse.

A speaker's story or narrative is significant in shaping identity. Stories people tell or do not tell about themselves reveal their values and morals, and they also serve to construct a representative self or what could be considered a person's identity. In Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur asserts that the experience of identity is conveyed through a narrative structure: "We know ourselves as distinct from others and as continuous over time through...emplotment... a perpetual weaving and reweaving of past and present events into characters, motives, situations, actions. In effect we are characters in a story that we keep revising as our lives unfold" (140). The literary theory of New Historicism is useful here in uncovering ineffable stories and reweaving them into the individual and communal narratives that shape identity.



Thus, New Historicism yields a didactic and dynamic view of the historical context of Morrison's three texts and demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between history and literature. Again, this is useful in this study because the history of racial oppression in America has often been limited in scope and depth. New Historicism suggests that, through her novels, Morrison rewrites and revises history by speaking for the voiceless, by serving as a surrogate of sorts for oppressed people, consequently, shaping a discursive history that takes into account the narratives of historically marginalized peoples and communities.

New Historicism, applied to slave narratives, yields a fresh perspective that reminds the reader that the authors of these narratives often repress horrific experiences in the form of silence. Silence becomes symptomatic of traumatic experience. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* depicts the muted expressions of sexual violence in her African-American slave narrative. In one instance of Jacobs' memoir, she constructs her identity as an enslaved African-American woman disrupted by the traumatic, sexually violent experience of rape. In her own account of the experience, she cannot find words to express the overwhelming experience of being sexually assaulted: "My lips moved to make confession, but the words stuck in my throat. I sat down in the shade of a tree at her door and began to sew" (387). Jacobs' inability to articulate her experience of sexual assault, and to tell her story in chronological order, could signify her inability to incorporate the event into a sense of self and suggests the formation of a traumatic experience.

In *Beloved*, Morrison explicates this experience of sexual violence through the character of Sethe. Morrison gives voice to the experience of sexual violence and

becomes a voice for the historically silenced experience of Antebellum rape and sexual assault. This is significant because Morrison is critically aware of how African Americans have often been at the margins of their own narratives, dancing and singing for the sake of their white audiences. Through her novels, Morrison illustrates how these actions destroy agency resulting in detachment and paralysis for the individual. Trauma and New Historicism are theories central to this study as they establish the means by which horrific traumatic experiences are transferred mentally, physically, historically, and even communally. Thus through an analysis of these particular novels, one finds that Morrison constructs African-American characters as human beings who grapple with trauma that results from racial oppression. They also struggle to achieve agency and thereby direct their own futures, as well as construct their own identities. Writing then, for Morrison, reclaims those histories and expresses them such that African Americans are at the center of their own narratives.

Toni Morrison's *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* illustrate the characteristics of trauma and how it metastasizes and damages agency, causing physical and mental paralysis and detachment in the individual. By utilizing theoretical frameworks of trauma and New Historicism, the traumatic veil of double consciousness that African Americans experienced is explored; and the analysis reveals a climate of oppression, trauma, paralysis, and detachment in the individual.

Through the theoretical framework of trauma theory presented in the works of Judith Herman and others such as Cathy Caruth, Sigmund Freud and J. Brooks Bouson, the dynamics of trauma are discussed. The ideas expressed by these authors contribute greatly to the sustainability of this study. Their ideas also shed light on the unwritten

interior lives of African-American fictional characters and how oppression through racism often imprints trauma on its victims.

In *Song of Solomon*, the Dead family exhibits symptoms of dynamic trauma that are passed on from one generation to the next throughout the text. Ruth repeatedly lies with the body of her dead father, paralyzed by the profound loss of the only man who has ever loved her. Milkman has a sexual relationship with his cousin, and Macon Dead is emotionally unavailable. In *Sula*, a psychologically detached Sula causes Chicken Little's death and witnesses her own mother's death. In *Beloved*, a mother commits and justifies infanticide; she keeps her surviving daughter a virtual prisoner at home and sees nothing wrong with living in a haunted house. These characters suffer some form of traumatic experience, and consequently, because it is not addressed, it grows, becoming dynamic in nature and making it difficult for one to develop psychologically. The characters do not seem to grow or develop beyond their traumatic experiences. Consequently, using trauma theory and New Historicism as critical lenses, one is able to provide cultural and literary contexts for the novels and invite a deeper understanding of oppression as a means of imprinting dysfunction on the oppressed. These particular literary theories reveal the psychological and social lives affected by trauma Morrison constructs within these selected novels.

With this new perspective, Morrison's novels offer inexhaustible possibilities for future research. As dynamic trauma is passed from generation to generation in an ever-changing world, one may posit how future generations may experience dynamic trauma and what effects it may have and through what means agency is possible. In Morrison's novels, her characters Sula and Milkman not only confront their cultural legacy but also

embrace it. Morrison again seems to be hinting that acknowledging traumatic experience along with the act of rememory is the path to moving beyond traumatic experience. As current generations attempt to distance themselves from the traumatic past of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, rather than confront the traumas of the past, the consequences of such actions suggest a continuation of traumatic experiences in African Americans.

### **Historical Cultural Background**

An important historical event that establishes the foundation for this study and introduces racism through the enslavement of Africans in America is the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. According to Jeffrey Alexander's *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, cultural trauma "occurs when a member of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their identity in fundamental and irreversible ways" (1). The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which lasted until the early nineteenth century, is a significant experience of cultural trauma as it tore mothers from children, wives from husbands, and people from one another. It all but destroyed the cultural, spiritual, and communal identity of enslaved Africans. This initial traumatic experience of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade undergirds the enslavement and racial oppression of African Americans who would later witness and experience even more nuanced forms of trauma, including rape, forced servitude, and other physical and mental abuses. By examining the historical and cultural backgrounds of Africans that were affected by the slave trade and the effects of racial oppression on subsequent generations of African Americans, one can locate the presence of trauma and its disruptive after-effects in the African-American

cultural experience, particularly the inability to construct an accurate reflection of one's individual selfhood.

### **Enslavement of Africans**

In order to comprehend the full impact of trauma on African-American peoples, the established religious principles and values of West Africans before the cultural trauma of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade should be examined. An examination at this level requires the abandoning of preconceived Western philosophical notions of West African thought and religion as well as the temptation to judge West African religious forms and content from the cultural perspectives of Western religious forms and content. After all, African and European religions are part of two distinct worldviews which should be understood on the basis of their own criteria. The study of the principles which connect West African religions and philosophies illustrate an historical and cultural context that reveal common values and morals many West Africans ascribe to, regardless of religious sect or geographical location. By examining these religious and philosophical underpinnings of West Africans, one may derive a somewhat generalized West African view of the universe and the age-old values and morals that have produced such a unique and complex view of the universe before the experience of the slave trade, therefore, presenting a stark contrast between West African life before and after the experience of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Toni Morrison is cognizant of these religious and philosophical views which culminate into a cosmological structure she often appropriates in her works. Most West Africans hold true that the universe is created by God, who has in turn created and

nurtured human existence, providing food, shelter, and all the other necessities required for human existence. God is viewed as having many different roles and titles. God is the Creator, the Protector, the Father, and the Ruler of the universe. In *Introduction to African Religion*, John Mbiti describes how some West Africans perceive God: “The point in both images is that God is the Parent and people are his children. In some places he is even called the Great Ancestor, the Elder, the Grandfather, meaning that it is from him that all people and all things originated” (53). Not only does this suggest a strong sense of identity and belonging to a communal group, it also illustrates the importance of specific familial ties in West African culture.

In the creation of the universe, God is believed to have created the heavens and the earth which are connected through human beings. People embody both the heavenly (spirit) and the earthly (body) in human form. People are the beneficiaries of all things. Both the heavenly and the earthly powers of the universe are used for the advancement of people. People must live in harmony with the elements they wish to use. Therefore, if spiritual or earthly elements are disturbed or unduly disrupted, it is humans who will suffer the most. This belief is evident in Morrison’s novels.

African cultural research also confirms that many West Africans believe there is a cyclical nature to spirits and that the origin of spirits is with God in the afterlife. Then the spirit is given a physical form on earth, which could be human. Moreover, when a physical body dies, the spirit joins with the Creator to repeat the cycle over again. This ideology suggests that people never truly die. Death is only a crossing over to the other world where one is reborn again. Clearly, Morrison is aware of this cosmological

perspective and appropriates it in *Beloved*. Sethe's murdered daughter comes back to life at the age she would have been had she lived thus demonstrating the cycle of life.

These are the major components of what might be generalized as a West African worldview. God, humanity, and the spirits demonstrate the order and origin of the universe. These basic philosophical views of the universe set the stage for agency in the rituals and ceremonies observed in African religions. These views assist in the construction of one's identity. God, man, and spirits all play their respective roles in making sense of the world. Each entity answers the ancient questions of why we are here, what we are to do here, and which of those things cannot be explained. In essence, God answers why we are here. Humans are held accountable for the earth answers what we are to do here, and spirits explain those things which otherwise cannot be explained. To combine these beliefs and practices, one becomes a witness to a general perspective of West African religion and philosophies in their earliest form.

Trauma, in the *Encyclopedia of Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Guide*, is defined as "a sudden, potentially deadly experience, often leaving lasting, troubling memories" (xxiii). In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* by Cathy Caruth, the author points to a more complex description of trauma characterized by Sigmund Freud: "...a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind... that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple healable event, but rather an event that... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and the repetitive actions of the survivor. (3-4)

This description of trauma is particularly useful in characterizing the experience of Africans who experienced the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and those who subsequently experienced racial oppression in America. These were indeed traumatic events as they were injurious to people physically and mentally. As Judith Herman states in *Trauma and Recovery*, "...traumatic events, in calling fundamental human relationships into question, can shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others" (51). This horrific event could further lead to a specific type of trauma called cultural trauma:

Cultural trauma involves more than physical destruction of people, property, and landscapes such as might be seen in warfare or ethnic cleansing. It directly or indirectly attacks what constitutes culture, of which there are some essential yet vulnerable elements: body/space practices, religion, histories, language, state organizations, and economics.

(B. H. Stamm et al. 95)

These individual and cultural traumatic events are further distinguishable as being multilayered and metastasizing (dynamic) within the individual causing detachment and paralysis. These forms of trauma are also defined as dynamic trauma. Dynamic Trauma is distinguishable from other types of trauma in the sense that it grows and can encompass all forms of traumatic experiences; it ultimately comes to affect more than just the area where trauma is inflicted. It destroys agency and the ability for one to render an account of one's individuality. Dynamic Trauma, as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade and racial oppression, catastrophically disrupts the cycle of life to which many West Africans were accustomed.



In the midst of the European slave trade, Africans suffered an enormous blow to their physical, psychological and spiritual foundation. Europeans expressed contempt for African life and beliefs as Africans were physically abducted from their homelands and forced aboard slave ships. Africans were not allowed to practice many of their indigenous beliefs. These actions illustrate how controlling Europeans felt they had to be to keep Africans from using all of their physical and spiritual resources to rebel against their oppressors.

The Middle Passage disrupted families and separated individuals from their unique identities within the community. The sons and daughters of Africa were no longer viewed as sons and daughters connected to a larger community/family, but were denied agency to control their own lives and the lives of others to which they were connected, effectively damaging their sense of personhood. This again disrupts the cycle of life that Africans had come to know and believe in. During the Middle Passage, the slave captors also denied Africans a proper burial and funeral ceremony. Some Africans believed that if they jumped from the slave ship to their physical death, their spirit would go home and they would be able to help those in bondage. Whenever possible, their captors deterred this hope, however, by retrieving and mutilating the dead bodies of those who jumped overboard. This deed conveyed the message that, even in death, the captors still had control over their persons, thus inflicting even more trauma on those who witnessed these events by demonstrating to them that they had no control over their own bodies in this life or the next.

Those ancestors who were murdered and jettisoned overboard were silenced. Their voices and spirits were lost in a watery grave. What would now become of the

cycle of life seized by traumatic events? What would happen to those elderly men and women whose time it was to lay their burdens down and travel across the great river to the other side where their mother and mother's mother should have been waiting? The waters, which were traditionally seen as points of transformation between the worlds of the living and the dead, seemed to be sacrificing enslaved Africans on a pale horse of unspeakable horrors. It would seem that the waters were against them, washing their land, language, culture, and community away as they moved out across the watery wilderness. In *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Equiano describes his experience as he realizes he is a prisoner aboard a slave ship:

I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of home, or gaining the shore... And I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightening by my ignorance of what I was to undergo. (33)

Equiano illustrates the horrific experience of being stripped of everything familiar to him and overwhelmed by the reality of his situation. The journey across the Atlantic Ocean left those who survived the passage to America to often describe themselves as motherless children—traumatized. Africans were taken with shackles on their hands and feet. They were bought and sold away (detached) from their communities/families at a price and devalued to the status of chattel. It would seem that all had been lost for these children of Africa, that the traumatic experience of being taken from their homes and treated as less than human would leave an indelible wound for generations to come to struggle with and to heal from and move beyond.

In the novels selected for this study, Morrison reveals these horrors “too terrible to relate” and bestows upon African Americans a sense of agency through the written word. This dissertation asserts that dynamic trauma depicted in Toni Morrison’s novels *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* damages agency and leads to detachment and paralysis in the individual. The traumatic events of slavery and racial oppression have been the subject of much discussion and study. Toni Morrison’s fiction seeks to reveal the often unspoken contents of these atrocities from the inside out. New Historicism and trauma theory highlight the effects of dynamic trauma on the characters in her novels. In addition, by creating characters that live and suffer within the context of traumatic experiences of slavery and racial oppression, she constructs a glimpse into the effects of trauma and possible pathways to overcoming traumatic events. This study argues that these particular novels by Morrison illustrate the insidious nature of trauma and how, if not addressed, grow, ultimately destroying personhood and the ability to render self-narrative which is central to identity construction. Reconstructing narratives that reflect the self as a more complete entity and one that demonstrates agency are necessary components for overcoming the psychological damage of trauma.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The theoretical perspective of this study is based on Trauma theory and New Historicism. Trauma theory, derived from psychoanalytic theory, is perhaps best associated with the 19th century research of Sigmund Freud. While there are others including Jean-Martin Charcot and Joseph Breuer who all contributed to what would later be called psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud's research on hysteria in the late 1890s and early 1900s is certainly germane to this study as it lays the foundation for trauma theory. Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth are also significant to this study. Judith Herman's work concerning the clinical symptoms and dialectic of trauma provide a current and useful theory of trauma. Cathy Caruth's research explores the connection between trauma and literature. Consequently, trauma theory, then illumines a particular way reading of Morrison's texts which are infused with traumatized male and female characters and their impact upon both self and community.

#### **Trauma Theory**

Freud began his inquiry into hysteria as an understudy of neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot in Paris, France. Charcot treated female patients who suffered paralysis, muscle spasms and other unexplained physical ailments. He concluded that many of the women actually suffered from a form of hysteria brought on by an emotional response to a real

experience in their pasts. For example, if a woman had a terrifying experience with water, thoughts, real or imagined, associated to that particular experience with water could trigger physical symptoms. Charcot believed that this was what he was seeing in his patients. Freud further expounds Charcot's view by asserting that there is connection between physical symptoms and the psychological experience of trauma. Freud also examines the work of his friend Joseph Breuer whose treatment of hysteria leads both men to conclude that the psychological experience of trauma must be verbalized. This therapy was viewed as cathartic and described as "the talking cure." In Richard Webster's *Freud*, Webster describes Breuer's analysis of his patient Anna O.:

He [Breuer] came to the conclusion that when he could induce her to relate to him during the evening the content of her daytime hallucinations, she became calm and tranquil. Breuer himself saw this as a way of 'disposing' of the 'products' of Anna O.'s 'bad self' and understood it as a process of emotional catharsis. The patient herself described it as 'chimney sweeping', and as her 'talking cure'. (79)

Freud takes from Breuer's research how important verbalizing what seems ineffable is to treating patients of trauma. In telling the story of a traumatic experience, one is able to confront and move beyond it. Freud also recognizes the importance of memory. Without the ability to remember a traumatic experience, one cannot verbalize it. Freud suggests that the nature of remembering is a recalling of what has occurred in the past, and therefore, can be remembered inaccurately. As a result, trauma can be based on real or imagined trauma. These three important ideas concerning the connection between physical symptoms and psychological trauma, verbalizing trauma, and the importance of

memory in instances of traumatic experience are the basis of Freud's contribution to the theory of trauma. Charcot and Breuer's contribution to the field of trauma theory are invaluable. Freud combines these approaches by analyzing the deeper psychological impact of trauma and its physical symptoms, along with requiring patients verbalize traumatic experience. By the earlier 1900s, Freud's study of the mental breakdown thought to be a woman's disease—hysteria—is observed in the opposite sex.

This “mental breakdown” would later resurface, as veterans of war throughout history would be diagnosed with similar symptoms of hysteria. During World War I, the condition would be referred to as shell shock. One of the characteristics associated with men who experienced shell shock was emotional breakdown. Military authorities took the stance that shell shock was a sign of mental weakness or cowardice and often shamed soldiers who were diagnosed with it (Herman 28). World War II saw again an interest in the psychological impact of war on soldiers. Understanding the social implications associated with the terms “hysteria” and “hysterical,” military psychologists referred to the condition as “combat fatigue.” They recognized that the experience of combat fatigue was related to soldiers being exposed to extreme violence. It is not until after the Vietnam War that the characteristics of psychological trauma are named as “post-traumatic stress disorder” (Herman 28).

Trauma has been experienced by many different groups and has many different psychological and physiological symptoms. The women in Charcot and Breuer's study, Jewish Holocaust survivors, along with war veterans are a few who have experienced various forms of trauma. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth surmises Sigmund Freud's characterization of trauma:

...a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind... that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple healable event, but rather an event that... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and the repetitive actions of the survivor. (3-4)

In other words, the event is so psychologically overwhelming that it disrupts the survivor’s sense of identity, and his or her attachment to society. Because the event occurs rapidly and is unprepared for, the survivor is unable to comprehend fully what has occurred and is subjected to involuntary recurrences of surviving the event in the form of nightmares, flashbacks and other psychologically destabilizing phenomena. Freud’s analyses of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism* lay the foundation for what is considered psychoanalytical trauma and are useful to this study in several ways. In the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud uses literature to represent how trauma is experienced. He relates the story of *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Jerusalem Liberated) in which the warrior Tancred unknowingly kills his love interest, Clorinda, in a duel while she is disguised as the enemy. After her death and burial, he enters an enchanted forest and cuts a tall tree that begins to bleed, and the voice of Clorinda is heard coming from the tree, decrying that he has again mortally wounded her. The terrible experience of Tancred killing his love interest induces the traumatic experience of Tancred repeatedly hearing Clorinda’s voice in the tree. Tancred is psychologically repeating the act of killing Clorinda.

Freud uses literature to illustrate the effects of trauma points to a significant connection between experience and writing. Literature becomes a representation of experience and as such is used to examine the human condition. Author of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth states:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is that specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytical theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (3)

Caruth suggests here that the aim of both psychoanalysis and literature is epistemic in nature. In other words, both disciplines are concerned with knowing and the process by which knowing occurs. This is critical for this study as this author establishes a connection between traumatic experience and the novels of Toni Morrison. Literature becomes a valid representation of human experience, whether real or imagined, and offers a means of knowing the self outside of the self. Toni Morrison's novels express the African-American horrific (traumatic) experience of slavery that has been too terrible to relate, and presents truths that were experienced by slaves but perhaps were unwritten, and in a sense, forgotten and repressed. In *What Moves at the Margin*, Morrison declares,

So if I'm looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people [African Americans] who didn't write it (which doesn't mean they didn't have it); If I'm trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left—to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the



stories that I heard—then the approach that’s most productive and most trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from the image to the text. (72)

The theory of trauma is useful in analyzing her novels as she constructs images that serve to represent the unspeakable atrocities of slavery and the traumatic effects of racism. For Morrison, literature and storytelling manifest a way of knowing.

Another trauma theorist whose work is helpful to this study is James Berger. His article “Trauma and Literary Theory,” further expounds on how trauma is connected to literature:

But ‘trauma’ is not simply another word for disaster. The idea of catastrophe as trauma provides a method of interpretation, for it posits that the effects of an event may be dispersed and manifested in many forms not obviously associated with the event. Moreover, this dispersal occurs across time, so that an event experienced as shattering may actually produce its full impact only years later. This representational and temporal hermeneutics of the symptom has powerful implications for contemporary theory. (572)

These powerful implications can have great worth in the study of literature because literature is a representation of life and its numerous events, and may, subsequently, reveal or recreate traumatic events and experiences that can be useful in interpreting real traumatic situations and yield a pathology. Words are signifiers of experience and connected to the system of symbols and language. While Judith Herman does not directly connect traumatic experience to literature, she most certainly implies an

explication strategy on how to read trauma narratives: “Survivors challenge us to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, to make meaning of their present symptoms in the light of past events” (3). This strategy is evident in Morrison’s novels. Morrison, given the representations of trauma in her novels, certainly aims for the reader to connect the fragments, to reconstruct history, and to make meaning of the symptoms of a traumatic African-American past. Morrison recreates how time is often fragmented within traumatic experience. It is often fragmented because the victim is psychologically overwhelmed and either unable or unwilling to be fully aware of the violent event, and it resurfaces as a disordered flashback, coming alive in bits and pieces.

At the core of the various depictions of psychologically overwhelming events that Morrison’s characters face, lies the implicit, primary trauma of racism. The African-American characters in Morrison’s novels experience horrific events which mirror an African-American racialized past, in part, if not entirely, as a consequence of racism. Race becomes a marker by which characters are susceptible to unspeakable occurrences of trauma. This is significant because it illustrates that Morrison is not only highlighting trauma and its effects but also indicting racism as a psychologically trauma-inducing agent in the lives of African Americans and their respective communities. Morrison’s texts depict racism as trauma thirty years before the subject is seriously examined in the field of psychology. Robert T. Carter’s 2012 ground-breaking study on the effect of race-based trauma produces the first clinical and research instruments used to measure race-based injuries. In his research, he uses the following definition of racism:

The transformation of racial prejudice into individual racism through the use of power directed against racial group(s) and their members, who are

defined as inferior by individuals, institutional members, and leaders, which is reflected in policy and procedures with the intentional and unintentional support and participation of the entire race and dominant culture. (3)

This definition of racism could be used to describe the foundations of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, American slavery, American lynching, and Jim Crow; these historical events characterize the methods through which the trauma of racism is inflicted on black bodies. Carter also makes a distinction between post-traumatic disorder and race-based trauma: “Race-based Traumatic Stress injuries are not due to a mental illness or disorder but caused by emotional or physical pain or the threat of emotional and physical pain resulting from the different forms of racism” (6-7). Race-based Traumatic Stress is similar to Post-Traumatic Disorder, but the distinguishing factor is that it does not have the threat to physical life at its core. Race-based trauma is primarily an emotional injury and not defined as a mental illness. Morrison’s novels clearly illustrate the effects of race-based trauma in her fictional characters.

The reconstruction of history is also central to the trauma theory. As previously discussed, often times historians have marginalized or totally omitted African-American experiences and perspectives from the dominant historical record. These experiences must be written back into the historical record. These voices are consistently ignored or not placed at the center of their own experiences. This most certainly is the case with American slavery. Morrison allows her readers to experience and also reconstruct history by couching her stories in historical contexts. She places African Americans at the center of their narratives thus giving voice to their experiences that were previously ignored or

devalued. As a result, Morrison is challenging the reader to understand that what they are reading is informed by a traumatic past.

The effect of trauma on the individual is a central focus of this study. Individual trauma is ultimately a failure of a person's memory to keep certain spatial and temporal order as the result of an overwhelming event. Detachment and fragmentation are often signifiers of individual trauma. Traumatic experiences often sever context from text, leaving the trauma victims to feel isolated from themselves and community. Herman points out:

The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion... This kind of fragmentation, whereby trauma tears apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion, is central to the historic observations on post-traumatic stress disorder. (34)

Survivors of trauma often go inside themselves and struggle to sort out the fragmented elements of an experience. They attempt to reconnect those fragmented elements to the outside world. Traumatic events psychologically fragment and disconnect an individual from within. Trauma literature is often concerned with this connection of text to the context, and readers of trauma narratives are consequently participating in explicating this text-context association. Readers of trauma are not only witnessing the trauma but also creating context, experiencing the narrative through the often-fragmented lens of the traumatic experience and are prompted by the text to create meaning from it. While the overwhelming event may be different, the results in the individual renders one isolated

with a shattered sense of self. This ultimately renders a more complicated picture, relating not only the symptoms of detachment and fragmentation, but also the cause of the traumatic event as well. Thus readers of Morrison are able to feel and observe the various ways that trauma produced by racism can be experienced through physical violence, sexual violence, and psychological abuse.

In addition to detachment and fragmentation, latency and repetition are also consequences of individual trauma. Herman also suggests latency is the delayed reaction to trauma. Repetition occurs when an individual is unable to move beyond an overwhelming experience, repeating the event in the form of flashbacks or dreamlike states. No matter the circumstances of the overwhelming event that causes the trauma, the inherent latency and repetition associated with the traumatic experience are consistent characteristics. The story of Tancred in *Gerusalemme Liberata* offers some very specific characteristics of individual traumatic experience identified by Caruth and Herman. It is important to recognize that Tancred's traumatic experience does not occur until he sees Clorinda's blood and hears her voice (Clorinda is Tancred's love interest). The initial act of killing Clorinda is not the trauma. Instead, it is the inability to process this act psychologically that consequently repeats itself with the cutting of the tall tree streaming blood and hearing Clorinda's voice repeatedly. This is the trauma. In its general definition, "trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (91). It is significant to note that trauma is characterized as a response; it is a reaction to an overwhelming experience. This means that the time it takes for the response to reveal itself suggests there is also a

certain latency that occurs within traumatic experience. The inherent effects of this latency include repression and forgetting. Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, that as a response to an overwhelming violent event that the psyche is unprepared for, the ego attempts to protect itself by forgetting the event and repressing it, which later resurfaces on its own in the form of nightmares or repeated dreams: “The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (17). This perspective suggests that forgetting and repression are also inherent elements of trauma. This view also concludes that the forgetting of the event is how that event is experienced. In other words, the smothering event is difficult to retain because it is by nature overwhelming the senses. The mind is occupied with surviving the event much more so than processing it.

Trauma expert Judith Herman’s preeminent work explicating trauma and its psychological effects really lays the foundation for this study. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, she suggests that while forgetting and repression are possible effects of latency, disassociation is also a possible effect as well—where one can be completely cut off from any direct relation to the event: “The traumatized person may no longer seem frightened and may resume the outward forms of her previous life. But the severing of events from their ordinary meanings and the distortion in the sense of reality persists” (48). In the story of Tancred, it could be argued that Tancred is psychologically overwhelmed by the act of killing the love of his life, and therefore, subconsciously forgets the act and represses it. The blood from the trees and the hearing of her voice are responses to his conscience trying to access the catastrophe experienced but not known.

This literary example illustrates the multiple effects of trauma on the individual, many of which are exhibited in Morrison's characters.

Just as individual trauma has various effects on the human condition, another type of trauma, which also contains disastrous consequences, is communal trauma.

Communal trauma, which is also considered cultural trauma, is a specific type of trauma suffered by a collective. In Kai Erickson's acclaimed work *Everything in Its Path*, he makes the distinction between individual trauma and communal trauma clear:

By individual trauma, I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively... By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissue of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma." But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared... 'We' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (Erikson 153-154)

Communal trauma affects a group of people—a collective—linked together by practices, histories, space and time. Communal trauma destroys the very fabric that connects people to one another and the community itself. This is a significant departure from individual trauma in the sense that the effects of communal trauma are felt less rapidly

and damage the communal connection between the collective and the individual. It also damages the ability to participate in a communal environment far more than individual trauma. With communal trauma, the community is no longer viewed as a space of safety and a place to develop societal attachments. People are isolated in their traumatic experience and are unable to recognize the damage until long after the damage is done. Communal trauma manifests itself in the individual's inability to connect with the community. For example, in *Considering a Theory of Cultural Trauma and Loss*, B.H. Stamm relates a situation of cultural trauma where Liberian children as young as six discuss the challenges they face in attempting to reconnect with their communities and families:

The children reported becoming soldiers out of revenge, necessity, seeking belonging, or peer pressure. They wanted help: 'Talk to us because we did so many horrible things.' They reported that their desires were community and family reconciliation and a 'culturally normal' life, which included going to school, having a job, and farming. (104)

It is difficult for a group of children to be integrated back into a community when they suffer the effects of communal trauma. As a result, cognitive dissonance emerges, as children who were initially taught that killing is bad but later were forced to kill becomes an overwhelming experience many children find difficult to move beyond. Because of these horrible acts that they have committed and witnessed, the children ideally desire to return to some sense of communal normalcy. They continue to relive the shame, the guilt, the hurt and the pain associated with being child soldiers; this makes it difficult to move beyond the traumatic experience and connect with the community.



The effects of communal trauma exact its toll on the formation of identity. The connection between the individual and the community is essential for identity formation. If that connection is severed or damaged, identity formation becomes extremely difficult without the context of community. Consequently, it becomes difficult to acquire true knowledge of self. The self is split between who the self thinks it is and who the self thinks the community thinks it is without the aid of an integrated form of self and community to bridge the space between the two concepts of the self. This is exemplified in W. E. B. Du Bois' 1903 text *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being tom asunder. (45)

In the context of a hostile American community that seeks to denigrate, control, and infuse black bodies with inherent evil, and perpetuates African-American images which are contrary to a positive personal narrative and an inclusive American community, a crisis of identity and meaning emerges for the individual. Communal trauma ultimately isolates individuals and experiences, and it deteriorates authentic connections among people until the community is all but destroyed.

Although communal trauma is often described as slow-working and insidious, communal trauma can be negotiated. According to Eryerman and Seidman's 2001 *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formations of African American Identity*, communal

trauma can be negotiated by forming and reforming connections to the historic past that ultimately reform a non-destructive communal identity. Identity formation is a continuous act; and as such, one must constantly reshape and integrate the past with the present. What becomes crucial in the process is that the past, in the form of historic narrative, does not transmit the damaging traumatic effects of the past into one's identity.

While communal trauma damages the connection between the individual and the community, there are some dynamics of trauma that are shared irrespective of the individual or community. One element that has also been discussed at length by Herman is the dialectic of trauma. The dialectic of trauma concerns the tension or opposition between two or more interacting forces relating to trauma. The tension occurs when a survivor experiences an overwhelming event and mentally oscillates between two opposing psychological states (Herman 47). A survivor may oscillate between feeling numb, being unable to feel or knowing how to feel, being unable to emote the appropriate response and being extremely sensitive and in a heightened emotional state. Another example relating to the dialectic of trauma is a situations when a trauma survivor goes back and forth between reliving the past and living in the present. This occurs when a survivor has flashbacks and momentarily relives the past and its psychologically overwhelming events and then comes to the awareness of his or her present state. When this happens, a kind of vertigo ensues where time is disrupted, and the cognitive function breaks down, and the survivor is unable to distinguish the past from the present in its regular order.

This temporal disruption also leads to another dialectic of trauma—the oscillation between reality and fantasy. Reliving past events calls into question the ability to

differentiate between what is real and what is imagined. A traumatized person is often unable to distinguish between the two as they (reality and fantasy) merge into one existence. One may also oscillate between being a victim and a survivor. At times one may feel like a victim—helpless and isolated in his or her feelings and at other times feel like a survivor who is able to negotiate the event, becoming an active participant in the healing process.

Oscillating between the individual and the community is also a characteristic of the dialectic of trauma. The individual attempting to make meaning from the fragments does so within the context of a community that will ultimately listen and become witness. It is impossible to create meaning without an individual's connection to the community. The challenge for someone who is traumatized is that he or she will go back and forth between his or her personal experience of trauma which is fragmented and his or her external view of his or herself attempting to understand the traumatic experience in the larger context of society.

What perhaps, more than any of the other symptoms of traumatic experience, lends to the title of this study is the dialectic of trauma between the speakable and the unspeakable. Relating atrocities too horrific to name or to express in words is often the point of trauma narratives. In order to move beyond trauma, one must, in most trauma narratives, name the event and express it. For the traumatized individual, this becomes difficult because there are no words that can express the deep, intense discord within the psyche that the event has created. Survivors have been known to become mute and unable to utter a word after an overwhelming experience because it was too devastating to put into words. When survivors are able to put the experience into words and speak, it

is often a fragmented account, going backward and forward and very difficult to follow as a result of the dialectic of trauma.

Another characteristic of the dialectic of trauma includes intrusion and constriction. Intrusion occurs when the trauma repeatedly interrupts the person's life, forcing him or her to relive past events, making it difficult to function in the world. Intrusion disrupts normal development and often irreparably changes the individual from who the person would have been without the traumatic experience into one who is unable to move beyond the past, overwhelming experience. The other end of the spectrum is constriction. It is a cognitive self-defense mechanism in which the survivor is perceived as helpless and powerless and simply shuts down in the midst of danger. One is unable to see a future for oneself as the trauma limits or constricts one's ability to see new possibilities and seemed doomed to repeat past experiences. An example would be how a deer caught in headlights is completely paralyzed and is unable to move. Constriction has been described often as an out-of-body experience when the survivor is aware but seems paralyzed. The survivor may feel as though the event is not occurring, creating a dissociative effect. According to J. Brooks Bouson's *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Bouson puts it this way:

Traumatic responses occur when both resistance and escape are impossible, overwhelming the individual's self-defense system. Because traumatic events produce 'profound and lasting changes in the physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory,' the traumatized individual 'may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion.' (7)

Bouson suggests that not only do traumatic events have an effect mentally, but they also have an effect physiologically. The body becomes a repository for traumatic instances. These traumatic episodes can be dissociative in the sense that the individual may remember bits and pieces of the traumatic event without any connection to the experience. For example, an individual who experiences rape may be overwhelmed by the event to the point of not being able to comprehend what has taken place but may have reoccurring nightmares that depict someone being raped and is unable to recognize himself or herself as the survivor. In Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, she also makes the critical assertion that trauma registers its effects on the body. In the case of children who are abused, Herman suggests that their "normal regulation of emotional state is disrupted by traumatic experiences that repeatedly evoke terror, rage and grief" (108). This emotional state is often brought on by a sense of abandonment or profound sense of loss and can lead to self-mutilation as a method of assuaging the psychological pain:

Survivors who self-mutilate consistently describe a profound dissociative state preceding the act. Depersonalization, derealization, and anesthesia are accompanied by a feeling of unbearable agitation and compulsion to attack the body. The initial injuries often produce no pain at all. The mutilation continues until it produces a powerful feeling of calm and relief; physical pain is much preferable to the emotional pain that it replaces...Self-injury is intended not to kill but rather to relieve unbearable emotional pain, and many survivors regard it, paradoxically, as a form of self-preservation. (109)

It is regarded as a form of self-preservation because it becomes a way to self-medicate by inducing heightened emotional states as a cathartic release of emotional pain throughout the body. This particular pathology of bodily trauma is illustrated best in *Sula*. Both Sula and Eva's self-mutilation (bodily trauma) can be attributed to the traumatic events they suffer. Trauma can be experienced as a psychological phenomenon, and it can also be imprinted on the body. The survivor may have a bodily reaction such as sweating or shaking. According to Allen Young's article *Bodily Memory and Traumatic Memory*, these physical symptoms become attached to the memory of the traumatic experience: "Trauma victims seek to repeat these experiences because the endorphins released in the repetition produce a tranquilizing effect and reduce feeling of anxiety, depression, and inadequacy...Over time people would become addicted both to their endorphins and their memories that release these chemicals" (95). The psychological effects of trauma are devastating and can have a long lasting physiological effect.

The traumatic effects can also be passed on from one individual to another, from one generation to the next generation. This is known as generational trauma. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber explains in *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*:

...good parents who experience trauma place their infants at risk through their behavioral response to trauma. In turn, infants who are frightened by their parents are 'in an irresolvable, disorganizing and disoriented paradox in which impulses to approach the parent as the infants haven of safety will inevitably conflict with the impulses to flee from the parent as a source of alarm. (12)

Schreiber makes the argument that a poor attachment between mother and child is also a result of experienced trauma that can lead to feelings of alienation and separation anxiety in the child. This poor connection between mother and child suggests that individuals and generations who have not actually experienced a traumatic event may still be susceptible to its effects through transference. Ron Eryerman's *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* makes it clear that the trauma of slavery was not only a communally traumatic experience, it was also an integral part of what made one an African American even though subsequent generations had not experienced slavery:

It was slavery, whether or not one had experienced it, that defined one's identity as an African American...It was within this identity that direct experience, the identification 'former slaves' or 'daughter of slaves' became functionalized and made generally available as a collective and common memory to unite all blacks in the United States. (16-17)

Through the communal trauma of slavery, African Americans form their identity. This process of identity formation has horrible implications for subsequent generations as they try to make sense of the dialectic of trauma transferred to them by their traumatized forefathers and mothers. In a cultural space that has marginalized their experiences, which many African Americans still find too terrible to relate, the traumatic effects linger.

What sets this study apart from other studies of trauma is that this study asserts that dynamic trauma encompasses all of the types of trauma previously mentioned, whether it is individual, communal, or generational, and that these traumas continue to

metastasize in the individual. It is dynamic in nature. As a result, if left unchecked, its effects can be felt in other physiological and psychological areas. The trauma can be seen as a living entity that develops and consumes its host. In Dori Laub's essay "*Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle*," the dynamism of trauma is hinted at, as he analyzes a Holocaust survivor's testimony:

Moreover, survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory, that is, of a forcibly imposed 'external evil,' which causes an endless struggle with and over a delusion. The 'not telling' of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life. (64)

One example of how the dynamism of trauma is illustrated is in Morrison's *Beloved*. The character of Beloved is introduced as a ghost, but as the trauma develops, the ghost manifests as human flesh and continues to consume and grow until it is finally confronted by the individual (Sethe) and the community.

One of the central propositions of this study is that dynamic trauma damages agency. Agency is the ability to act on one's own behalf with purpose, to be able to render self-narrative. From a postmodernist view, the self is not fixed but rather a composition and compilation of narratives that make up the self. Philosopher G.B. Madison says it best: "The self is the way we relate, account for, speak about our actions...the self is the unity of an ongoing narrative..." (161-162). In light of this definition of self, Harlene Anderson explains in *Conversations, Language and Possibilities* what it means to have agency:



Having self-agency or a sense of it means having the ability to behave, feel, think, and choose in a way that is liberating, that opens up new possibilities or simply allows us to see that new possibilities exist.

Agency refers not only to making choices but to participating in the creation of the expansion of possible choices. The concept of agency can be likened to having a voice and being free to use that voice or not use it.

(231)

Agency is an important component in producing narrative because it not only permits one to tell one's story but also to organize it in such a way that it can be related to a larger community. Testimony in the form of narrative is critical so that the experience may be integrated and ordered into one's life. In Laub's work with Holocaust survivors, he makes this observation:

The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to [*tell*] and thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one has buried truth in order to live one's life. (63)

Consequently, the narrative is critical to identity formation because the stories told and believed by individuals and the community become key unifiers of the community and do as much to define the community as it does to define the individual: "Narrative becomes the way we imagine alternatives and create possibilities and the way we actualize these options" (213). This does not mean that agency is necessarily limiting. Participation in

one's own story suggests that one is only limited by one's own beliefs and narrative:

“Our self-narratives can permit or hinder self-agency. That is, they create identities that permit us to do or hinders us from doing what we need or want to do...” (Anderson 232).

As a result, agency in rendering a narrative of self is essential to identity formation for both the individual and the community. Without this ability, identity formation is arrested.

Dynamic trauma has a debilitating effect on agency and the ability to render self-narrative primarily because it disrupts and distorts the survivor's sense of control and the survivor's ability to be an authentic witness. Reoccurring traumatic images that intrude psychologically make it difficult to create new narratives, particularly if one is continuously repeating the past. Essentially, one is stuck or paralyzed by the traumatic event and unable to construct a narrative that leads to a healthy identity within a community. Not only is one paralyzed by the traumatic event, one also is left with a distorted memory of the event and one's self. Because the event is not fully comprehended by the survivor and is overwhelming, it becomes difficult for the survivor to bear witness and express an authentic narrative. In other words, these memory distortions lead to a failure to witness. In an article, Laub discusses three distinct levels of witnessing with regard to the Holocaust experience: “The level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (61). Being a witness to oneself involves a direct experience of trauma and how one processes that trauma. Being a witness to the testimony of others highlights the connection to community that helps to shape identity. There must be someone to give, as well as. to listen to the

testimony given. The last level of witnessing involves being a witness to the process. This involves recognizing the method in which the listener and the teller construct narrative to arrive at the meaning of the experience. Laub explains, “I observe how the narrator and myself as listener alternate between moving closer and then retreating from experience—with the sense that there is a truth that we are both trying to reach, and in this sense serves as a beacon we both try to follow” (62). Witnessing is a very important act for Morrison as well. Truth and authentic experience are often based on perspective. She often brings attention to the eyes of a character or the ability to *see* or be *seen*.

The inability to witness for the survivor of trauma has damaging effects. Laub discusses a holocaust survivor who has failed to witness the traumatic (The Holocaust) event: “...in her memory of her Holocaust experience, as well as in the distorted way in which her present life proceeded from this memory, she failed to be a witness to herself. This collapse of witnessing is precisely, in my view, what is central to the Holocaust experience” (Laub 65). Without the ability to negotiate trauma, particularly through agency and the use of narrative, the traumatic symptoms metastasize and create a sense of detachment in the individual. The distorted memory constructs an alternate view of self which is withdrawn from community. Laub rightly surmises that the failure to witness has deep implications. It suggests, particularly in the case of the Holocaust, that there are no witnesses, no outsider or *other* to come to one’s aid, no one to be heard by. Survivors of trauma are unable to bear witness and bystanders seem to acquiesce to the pathology or have little effect. As a result, the event can be unhinged from all sense of reality to the point of historic erasure:

The Nazi system turned out to therefore to be fool proof, not only in the sense that there were in theory no outside witnesses but also in the sense that it convinced its victims, the potential witnesses from the inside, that what was affirmed about their 'otherness' and their inhumanity was correct and that their experiences were no longer communicable even to themselves, and therefore, perhaps never took place. This loss of the capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one's history is abolished, one's identity ceases to exist as well. (66-67)

Laub makes it clear that the failure to witness has debilitating consequences for agency and a sense of self. One's existence is predicated on the ability to tell one's own narrative and form some sense of identity. Dynamic trauma disrupts this sense of agency and, therefore, disrupts the ability to form a sense of identity.

### **New Historicism**

One particular theory that focuses on agency, narrative construction, and identity in literature and is helpful in this study is the theory of New Historicism. It is a key theoretical perspective popularized in the 1970s which is pluralistic in its application. New Historicism calls into question the assumed authenticity and superiority of historical narratives and presupposes that all literature is subjective. Prior to New Historicism, Historicist theory suggested history as an immutable fact and phenomena superior to the subjectivity of the individual. This break from fundamental premise in historicist literary

theory creates new possibilities for readers and authors alike. D. G. Myers' *New Historicism in Literary Study* outlines the major characteristics of the theory:

The proper way to understand it [New Historicism], therefore, is through the culture and society that produced it. (2) Literature, then, is not a distinct category of human activity. It must be assimilated to history, which means a particular vision of history. (3) Like works of literature, man himself is a social construct, the sloppy composition of social and political forces—there is no such thing as a human nature that transcends history. Renaissance man belongs inescapably and irretrievably to the Renaissance. There is no continuity between him and us; history is a series of ‘ruptures’ between ages and men. (4) As a consequence, the historian/critic is trapped in his own ‘historicity.’ (3-4)

For literary scholars and authors alike, such as Toni Morrison, the theoretical approach of New Historicism allows for the possibility to recreate new histories that were often marginalized and to place “historically” voiceless people at the center of their own narratives. It also gives the reader the authority to question the dominant discourse as an authentic, historic narrative and to participate further with the text. New Historicism suggests that since no one can escape the confines and conventions of his or her times, literature is both a product of the time and also the producer of the time as well since, “Literary works are both what a culture produces as well as what reproduces the ideology” (4). Consequently, literature then has the ability to shape and reshape human experience and the surrounding world. To read a text from a new historicist approach would be to understand a work through its historical context and to understand culture

through literature. The text and context appear in what is said and what is also left unsaid. In examining Morrison's novels from a new historicist approach, the marginalized voices of African Americans are given agency and reshape history which is ultimately viewed as a requisite for moving past traumatic experience. This is what Morrison calls rememory—the ability to tell and retell history from a human perspective. Gregory Kotecki, author of the article *The Ghost Daughter Returns Home: Memory of Slavery in Toni Morrison's Beloved*, puts it this way:

‘Rememory’, then, as opposed to memory concerned with “being,” is all about “becoming.” It is the act of remembering a memory/memories or “re-memoring,” which has vibrant, repetitive, and reconstructive form. It is also able to revisit memories, both physically and mentally (“pass on “over “stay”). As such, it spans between personal memory and collective memory; it is immersed in the collective unconscious, and yet acquired through personal experience. Also, it can shift forward and backward in time, making past and present mingle. At last, “re—memory” intensifies memory and makes it more dynamic. (934-935)

The ability to *rememory* is culturally rooted in West and Central African cosmologies and suggests that the concept of time is non-linear. This also allows for a much more didactic reading of Morrison's novels as she connects the interior to the exterior of African-American lives. In this attempt, Toni Morrison demonstrates what happens when African Americans do not achieve agency, speak the unspeakable, give voice to their experience and shape their identities through the telling of new histories.

## Summary

This chapter establishes the theoretical perspective of trauma along with new historicism and the distinguishing characteristics of dynamic trauma. Types of trauma that are examined in this study include personal trauma, also known as individual trauma, communal trauma, also known as cultural trauma, and generational trauma. Often times particular traumas overlap and have similar characteristics. However, for purposes of this study, these characteristics that set them apart from one another will be a central focus. The dynamics of trauma are complex and wide-ranging. They include the dialectic of trauma—the oscillation between two contrary states of being, constriction—limited possibilities and futures, and intrusion—reoccurring involuntary visions of the past intruding on the present in the way of flashbacks or nightmares. Trauma can also be cultural and passed from generation to generation. Ultimately, these dynamics of trauma, if left untreated metastasize, damage agency and result in paralysis and disconnection in the individual and may render one a shell of one's former self. This is referred to as Dynamic Trauma. New Historicism theory is useful in understanding the motives of Morrison and the characters she creates in her novels. The New Historicism approach can be used to highlight her objective to decenter dominant discourse and offer a subversive voice of the enslaved African. She tells the history beneath the history, relating text to context and framing stories in such a way that confront the trauma of slavery and allow African Americans to reconcile their past and establish agency, which can in turn lead to identity formation.

## CHAPTER III

### *SULA*: TRAUMA IN THE BOTTOM

Toni Morrison's second novel, *Sula* (1973), chronicles the friendship of two African-American women from childhood to adulthood. Throughout the novel, Sula Peace and Nel Wright experience abandonment, profound loss, and betrayal in an African-American community called the Bottom. They grow up together as close friends. Sula and Nel find comfort in one another and become complementary characters. The narrator describes their friendship this way: "Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other's personality. Although both were unshaped, formless things,..." (53). They are unintentionally, though simultaneously, responsible for Chicken Little's death, which they never forget: "They [Sula and Nel] held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay above ground forever" (66). As they mature into adulthood, Sula leaves the Bottom while Nel stays and gets married in her effort to be accepted as part of the Bottom community. When Sula comes back to the Bottom, Sula and Nel rekindle their friendship until Nel discovers that Sula has been having a sexual relationship with her husband, Jude. Later, after Sula dies, Nel realizes how important Sula was in her life and comes to understand the profound loss she suffers with the death of her only friend.



In *Sula*, various traumas are evident, including their consequentially damaging effects on agency. Jim Crow discrimination serves as the vehicle through which various forms of trauma impact African-American characters and community throughout the story. Morrison chooses to construct the novel as a type of historical narrative. The novel is divided into two parts which are subsequently divided into sections using years as chapter headings beginning in 1919 and ending in 1965. Each section thus signifies the passage of time and what is left unsaid by the characters during specific eras. Thus, the novel is constructed and relayed in bits and pieces; it is fragmented. The burden is on the reader to put the pieces together and construct meaning out of the incomplete historical narratives. Morrison purposefully leaves gaps in time which must be filled in by the reader. These characteristic gaps in time and fragmentation point not only to a narrative of historical trauma and how time is disrupted and consumed by the growth of trauma, but also the means through which agency is damaged, creating an underdeveloped African-American community with the inability to tell its own story. In addition, the way Morrison chooses to highlight the passage of time in this novel illustrates the impact of historic erasure. The gaps in time signal a loss of historical narrative. In fact, the only historical narrative the Bottom community knows of its beginning is a cruel, ironic joke, which can hardly be seen as a healthy or positive narrative of the individuals in the community. As time continues, the joke becomes the community's historical narrative and identity.

Trauma is illustrated, not only in the community but also in the individual characters. One can argue that individual traumas depicted in *Sula* contribute to communal traumas experienced in the Bottom community. More specifically, Shadrack

exhibits symptoms of individual trauma. Having returned from World War I and having seen his comrades literally blown apart, Shadrack exhibits signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. He is a shell of his former self; he is not only cut off from the social world but also estranged from his own physical and mental self: “He wanted desperately to see his own face and connect it with the word “private”—the word the nurse (and others who helped bind him) had called him” (10). Shadrack is withdrawn, isolated, and lacks agency. He participates in a war that he did not create and becomes the embodiment of trauma; he becomes what Morrison refers to as “the unspeakable.” He wonders why they call him a secret. He feels hidden and unseen.

Shadrack is a complex character because as much as he suffers from the trauma of war, his narrative becomes the initial traumatic perspective in which Sula and the Bottom community are framed. Shadrack experiences trauma and is disconnected from the community. He has no agency with regard to the war that robs him of his consciousness and comes back to his community lacking a connection to his physical self. By discovering his own reflection in the water, he becomes self-aware and able to regain pieces of himself: “There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face. A Black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real—that he didn’t exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more” (13). He attempts to connect his mind with his body, his outer world with his inner world. Recognizing his reflection in the water, Shadrack begins to connect with himself. He attempts to make sense of the horrific world of war that he has witnessed and to create order from the chaos and disorder it leaves behind. The ability to connect with himself and validate his

existence is paramount to the construction of his identity. Agency for Shadrack is his ability to identify himself, physically and mentally, and to have some sense of control over his own body and mind. Unfortunately, because of the life-threatening trauma of war and its randomness, Shadrack creates a ritualistic means by which to order his experience and further alienated him from the community. Establishing National Suicide Day allows Shadrack to mark space and time and is an attempt to create order out of disorder—to allow for bad things to happen in a way that he can process and, to some extent, control:

Shadrack began a struggle that was to last for twelve days, a struggle to order experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it....In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In this manner he instituted National Suicide Day. (14)

He compulsively relives and relates his own trauma and attempts to order his experience. It is repetitive in nature as it is an annual event. His individual trauma metastasizes into National Suicide Day and marks the community as it becomes part of the communal memory and historical narrative. Consequently, this connection between the individual and community based on traumatic occurrences shapes the Bottom community as much as it shapes Shadrack: “Once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things....they had absorbed it [the holiday] into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives” (15). It is no coincidence that Shadrack’s trauma frames the boundaries of subsequent traumatic events

in the novel. In *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*, Philip Page notes the connection between Shadrack and the Bottom community: "...Shadrack, whose sense of self and other is shattered in the war. He, however can provisionally control his fear of disintegration through his obsessively well-ordered cabin and his ritual of National Suicide Day, measures that parallel the Bottom's collective ability to control its traumas by incorporating whatever evils confront it" (71).

Shadrack's experience underscores the powerlessness, hopelessness, and damaged agency exhibited throughout the novel. Shadrack is stripped of his individual identity and is forced as a soldier to fight and kill others. His hands are no longer his, but rather part of a militaristic entity. The violence Shadrack experiences is physical and psychological. There is loss. The loss is Shadrack's identity and purpose in life. But Shadrack experiences these losses through no fault of his own. In the same way Shadrack is stripped of identity by war, words are stripped of their meaning by traumatic experience and also reconfigured. He ponders the word *private* not as a title associated with the army but as a signifier of something hidden. Morrison is again hinting at one of the effects of trauma—detachment. In the Foreword to *Sula*, Morrison addresses her initial plans to introduce readers to Shadrack at the very beginning of the novel: "Had I begun with Shadrack, as originally planned, I would have ignored the gentle welcome and put the reader into immediate confrontation with his wounded mind. It would have called greater attention to the traumatic displacement this most wasteful capitalist war had on black people, and thrown into relief their desperate and desperately creative strategies of survival" (Morrison xvi). Morrison is clearly commenting on the destructive forces of war, specifically on African Americans.

The reader is introduced to Shadrack who has been in the forced and hostile environment of war where survival is paramount and profound loss and detachment occur in the form of violence and death. When he comes back from the war, he is in pieces: “Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn’t know who or what he was...with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book...and nothing nothing nothing to do” (12). Shadrack is barely able to communicate and function as part of the larger community, much less connect what he has experienced with the community in which he exists. Not unlike the many Africans who were violently stripped from their homes and stolen away onto slave ships, Shadrack is also displaced and disoriented. Consequently, Shadrack, for the most part, is isolated from the community. As Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber states in *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Shadrack is an isolated character: “Recovered enough to function in daily life, Shadrack isolates himself from society, living on its fringes in an eccentric and independent way. While the black community initially shuns him, they eventually learn how to live with him” (84). He lives on the outskirts of town and is seen as an outcast. Because of the trauma Shadrack experiences, his psychological development and self-worth are damaged and consumed by the same traumatic experiences. The trauma is dynamic, meaning that it grows over time. At the beginning of the novel, for example, Shadrack is estranged from himself: “He wanted desperately to see his own face and connect with it the word ‘private’...” (Morrison 10). Toward the end of the novel, for example, Shadrack is described as “A little shaggier, a little older, still energetically mad” (173). Shadrack becomes an outcast who is not only estranged from self but is also isolated from the community. By the end of the novel, he is

irrevocably transformed into one who has survived trauma but fails to clearly negotiate its impact. He is consumed by his traumatic past. He is unable to achieve agency and reconnect to community in a way that offers an identity that is not predicated on destructive forces. Thus, Shadrack becomes a symbol of the insidious nature of dynamic trauma in an individual. The unaddressed trauma that he suffers continues to grow within himself. It consumes every aspect of his being—psychologically, physically, and emotionally rendering Shadrack detached, fragmented, and ill-prepared to create an historical narrative that places him at the center of his own experience. Ultimately, the inability to construct and shape identity results in Shadrack's destruction, both of himself and his community.

Through *Sula*, Morrison illumines the glaring parallel between the traumatic effects of war and the traumatic effects of racism on the human psyche. There is no medicinal or therapeutic treatment offered for the trauma Shadrack experiences. He is simply released onto the streets, and after falling asleep on a bench, he is told to move along. Shadrack's story is a terrible one that ends in estrangement from self and community. As the last line of Part One suggests, his story is also indicative of and related to Sula and the racialized communal experiences of trauma: "They were mightily preoccupied with earthly things—and each other, wondering even as early as 1920 what Shadrack was all about, what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their own town was all about, what they themselves were all about, tucked up there in the Bottom" (6). The traumas experienced by Shadrack, Sula and the Bottom community make them all detached from one another, leaving them curious about their own identities. Racism, through the vehicle of Jim Crow, then becomes just as much of a destructive force in

African-American communities as the destructive forces of war that Shadrack has experienced or the tragic events that Sula witnesses.

Morrison illustrates the insidious and destructive effects of racism as trauma in the form of Jim Crow laws experienced by African Americans and their communities. According to *The Origins of the First Jim Crow Laws* by Stanley Folmsbee, although the Jim Crow period did not begin with the end of the Reconstruction Era, it certainly was largely pronounced around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Jim Crow laws were commonly associated with extreme legally mandated laws and social segregation of the races (54). Disenfranchisement of the African-American population preceded this radical segregation and was necessary to accomplish segregation. Political motivations thus provided the original impetus for disenfranchisement; economic exploitation through law and custom became a normal occurrence. One of the first instances of Jim Crow laws being instituted involve the segregation of the races on trains. It is perhaps best to regard Jim Crowism as a legal and political system that had economic consequences which limited African-American people's ability to own land, become employed, and earn wages, have access to health care and education. Morrison populates the text with various instances depicting how Jim Crow operated and its detrimental effects on African Americans. Although white supremacy is not necessarily displayed overtly, it is deeply implicated as the source of profound loss and suffering.

The first type of trauma that the reader of *Sula* is introduced to is communal trauma. The novel begins with the destruction of the Bottom community. This cultural space, called the Bottom, is where the reader is also introduced to other community members such as Shadrack and the rest of the Peace and Wright family members.

Morrison's opening lines describe the violent destruction of this African-American community:

In that place, where they tore the night shade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom....They are going to raze the Time and Half Pool Hall, where feet in long tan shoes once pointed down from chair rungs. A steel ball will knock to dust Irene's Place of Cosmetology, where women used to lean their heads back on the sink tray. (Morrison 3)

As described above, Morrison connects communal space to its inhabitants and recounts the physical destruction of the Bottom. This African-American community is destroyed to make way for the leisurely enjoyment of the white community. The community has been violently uprooted and replaced with a golf course. Again, Morrison only hints at white supremacy, and the hinting serves to contribute to its nebulous nature. These micro-aggressions against African Americans make it difficult to identify racism as the cause of all their problems, and they cause one to question one's own assessment.

Ironically, what occurs to the physical space called the Bottom is also what occurs to the inhabitants of the Bottom community; the inhabitants like their physical space suffer the effects of physical destruction and cultural displacement. The places such as beauty shops, hair salons, and eateries where African Americans would commune and strengthen



the bonds of community, are obliterated. Shu-Ling Chen's article "Trauma and Place in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" stresses the relationship between place and trauma:

Place is regarded as an actor shaping identity of the characters. The fact that in *Sula* Toni Morrison begins with the demolition of the place where there was once a neighborhood is a powerful proof that we should historicize and contextualize trauma. In sum, trauma is situated in a specific culture and place and understood through the cultural values and social relationships associated with that particular place. (2)

Therefore, trauma is depicted from not only a physical perspective in the form of bulldozing the community's shops and local stores but also from a psychological perspective in the form of communal memories and communal connections that have now been destroyed and are no more.

The Bottom community's identity is largely shaped by a "Nigger Joke" (Morrison 4). A white farmer tricks a slave into taking a parcel of land up in the hills the farmer calls "the bottom of heaven" (4). This joke serves as an historical narrative that accounts for why the community is located in the hills. The land is difficult to farm and separated from the rich valley where the white people live. The significance of the joke is also that it illustrates how the Bottom's communal identity is figuratively and literally turned upside down by the destructive and traumatic forces of racism. This joke, which functions as a master narrative, is subsequently internalized and actualized by the African American residents of the Bottom. The narrative becomes part of their history and consciousness. In this sense, the community predicates its identity on negative racial images, and consequently, a distorted sense of identity emerges. Language is a critical

component in conveying meaning, particularly with regard to identity formation. Language can suffer trauma when words are stripped of their traditional meaning and assigned new, destructive functions and connotations. Morrison depicts this view of traumatic language by naming the town The Bottom. The top becomes the bottom and the bottom becomes the top. The Bottom community is actually located in the hills, and the white people live below in the valley and control the resources directly and indirectly. The valley, where the white people live, is fertile land ideal for farming, mining, and industry. As a result of these resources being controlled by Whites in the valley, the people in the Bottom community are dependent on White industries for their livelihood and, for the most part, have jobs as miners. Melvin Dixon's *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* further underscores the relationship between race geographical space in *Sula*:

Whites and blacks are changing geographical spaces: the former moving to the cooler hills, the latter descending to the crowded valley floor. This change and death reverse the notion of economic upward mobility for Medallion blacks, who have only a promise of work on New River Road, and foreshadow the further decline, or bottoming out, of the community.

(149)

When the Bottom community accepts the joke as an historical narrative, the initial African-American identity is destroyed and stripped of any positive meaning or connotation and replaced with the joke. The Bottom is stripped of any positive identity formation structures or processes, and it is given new destructive meaning and destructive functions. The joke then serves as an historic erasure of identity and posits a new, yet

harmful view of the people who live in the bottom as gullible and slow-witted. An oscillation between the fabricated racial identity in the joke and the Bottom's own communal experience is presented. As Schreiber discusses, "While this black community literally becomes homeless, it masks the pain of dislocation with humor in its perpetuation of the white man's 'joke' that set up the community in the first place" (83). This is characteristic of the dialectic of communal trauma. As a consequence of this feature of communal trauma and its insidious nature, the community slowly dies as its sense of identity slowly becomes more fragmented and more isolated from the rest of the world and allows for very little communal growth and development. By the end of the novel, many of the members of the Bottom community, including Shadrack, Eva, Hannah, and Helene are either in pieces, alienated, or isolated. Nel and Sula seem to be the only characters who appear to connect to one another.

Morrison highlights the importance of place—the neighborhood/community—as it shapes identity and can be essential to agency for its inhabitants. Through her depiction of the Bottom, Morrison demonstrates how an internalized false historical narrative of self can shape the future of a community and its individuals. The Bottom's identity is shaped by the trauma of racism, and the ensuing narrative conveys a damaged sense of agency that consequently leads to communal paralysis and stunted growth. For example, in the last section of *Sula* "1965", the Bottom is described as irrecoverable: "It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place...Now there weren't any places left, just separate houses, with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by" (Morrison 166). Ultimately, the Bottom ends as it begins, shattered by trauma. At least twenty people from the Bottom are trapped and killed in a tunnel after

National Suicide Day. The deaths at the end of the novel suggest that unaddressed communal trauma metastasizes, infecting individuals and ultimately destroying a community. Without agency and the ability to create healthy self-narratives, despite traumatic experience and loss, the African-American community of the Bottom dies. Dynamic trauma is observed in the slowly deteriorating Bottom community. The traumatic effects creep into all facets of life in the community, rendering the community irrecoverable.

Another type of trauma that Morrison's novel exhibits is that of generational trauma. When individuals harbor unique traumas which can be transferred along with communal trauma to other individuals, generational trauma often results. These individual traumas can be transmitted to future generations and can have a detrimental effect on a future generation's well-being. Morrison's characters are demonstrative of how trauma is transferred from generation to generation and how it culminates into dynamic trauma that damages agency and leads to paralysis and detachment from the community in two distinct generations of women from the Bottom.

The generations of Wright women in the novel make this clearly evident. Helene is born the daughter of a "Creole whore" and is constantly reminded by her grandmother to be "on guard for any signs of her mother's wild blood" (17). This is Helene's introduction to sexuality, and it is presented as a negative aspect of life. Because of the way in which her grandmother negatively portrays her mother and sex, Helene views sexuality as something to be on guard about and not necessarily embraced as a part of one's human development. Consequently, she develops strict values and lives a conservative lifestyle. She is ashamed of the narrative her grandmother tells her about

her mother's promiscuous, sexual past, and it clearly influences how she sees her own sexuality. For Helene, having a whore for a mother, and the shame associated with it, marks her a candidate for trauma. This traumatic narrative constricts her possibilities of sexual experience and makes her fearful of what should be a natural part of life. The narrative that Helene is told redefines her mother as someone unworthy of love. As a result, Helene deliberately constructs an identity built in opposition to the perceived inherent wildness attributed to her mother in order to mask the shame that she harbors. Helene joins the most conservative church in the community in an effort to distance herself from the perceived sexual promiscuity of her mother and shapes her identity to stand in opposition to her mother's. Helene is known in the Bottom community for her manners and refined demeanor: "A woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority" (18). Helene carefully constructs her life based on societal expectations, ensuring that she is perceived as a model of what is considered proper and appropriate. For Helene proper and appropriate also signify her admiration of whiteness. She has Nel physically shape her nose and put a clothes pin on it at night so that she will have "a nice nose" later in life. This desire to physically blend in with white people is an attempt to avoid the painful impact of racism. *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* by Kalpan Seshadri-Crooks suggests that Helene desires "whiteness [that] offers a totality, a fullness that masquerades as being" (45). The masking of African facial features is emblematic of her view of marriage also. She further succumbs to life's expectations by marrying Wiley Wright and settling in a new home in Medallion to alleviate the trauma of her familial past. Unfortunately, her attempt to reconstruct an identity free of trauma is disrupted while on the train to see her ailing

grandmother in New Orleans. Helene's self-constructed narrative which positions her as the appropriately-dressed good wife is stripped away. She is subjected to rejection and discrimination based on racism in the most traumatic fashion as she is humiliated by the white train conductor when she accidentally enters the white section of the train and is then humiliated once again when she must urinate outside at a train stop like all the rest of the "coloreds." For Helene, this experience triggers her memory of rejection and discrimination unleashing the bodily trauma held within her: "...And already she had been called 'gal.' All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble" (Morrison 20). Again she remembers the traumatic experiences of the past, of being rejected and somehow being marked as inferior. Her body reacts to the racism she experiences. It is evident that Helene is impacted by the experience on the train. What will also become apparent is that the trauma of being humiliated is transferred to her daughter, Nel. Nel, who witnesses her mother being humiliated, also absorbs the soldiers' disdain for her mother's actions. As a result, Nel decides that she will never be made to feel vulnerable like her mother:

If this tall, proud woman, this woman who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequaled elegance, who could quell a rustabout with a look, if she were really custard, then there was a chance Nel was too. It was on that train, shuffling from Cincinnati, that she [Nel] resolved to be on guard—always. (22)

Helene's humiliating experience with the African-American soldiers on the train and their contempt for her contributes to Nel's own traumatic experience. Later, Nel

attempts, just as her mother did, to submit to the Bottom's communal customs and traditions, becoming vulnerable by marrying Jude. Nel relives the trauma of rejection experienced by her mother when Jude abandons her. The look of contempt Jude has for Nel is compounded by an involuntary rememory of the humiliation of her mother that his actions trigger: "If only you had not looked at me the way the soldiers did on the train" (105). Both mother and daughter are guarded because of the traumatic experiences transferred to them by their mothers. Their lives are constricted and limited in depth and scope. Nel cannot see past her mother's humiliation and thus is unable to connect truly with Jude. David Marriot's "Bonding Over Phobia" in *The Psychoanalysis of Race* confirms this point: "Nel's trauma comes from watching her mother's trauma in the greater community, where 'culture determines and maintains the imago associated with Blackness'" (420). Similar to the trauma often experienced by a rape victim, Nel's trauma metastasizes and affects other areas of her life. She is unable to trust others, to have meaningful relationships and is forever on guard and fearful of being traumatized again. As a result of being on guard, Nel struggles to grow and develop as an individual and develop a sense of agency where she can define self in her own terms.

Guarding against trauma is merely an attempt to survive trauma. In surviving trauma, Helen is focused on self-preservation and thus unable to focus on self-development. She is never fully accepted by her community. In her attempts to mask her racial identity for the sake of white society, she alienates herself from the Bottom community. Nel repeats the sins of her mother by being so guarded and fearful of being rejected that she accepts the traditional role of housewife to become a part of the community. When Jude cheats on her with Sula, Nel is devastated and her memories of

rejection are rekindled and relived. Her pain is doubled when Sula dies: “That was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it because it was Sula that he had left her for” (Morrison 110). Nel is left isolated and disconnected. She also has the effects of trauma posited in her body: “Not only did men leave and children grow up and die, but even the misery didn’t last. One day she wouldn’t even have that. This very grief that had twisted her into a curve on the floor and flayed her would be gone” (108). She is unable to reconcile her relationship with Sula until it is too late. She only realizes the value of her relationship with Sula after Sula’s death. At Sula’s grave site, Nel breaks down: “Suddenly Nel stopped. Her eye twitched and burned a little...And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. ‘We was girls together’ she said as though explaining something” (174). At the end of the novel, Nel is alone with her own thoughts. Thus, the effects of generational trauma which culminates in dynamic trauma are seen throughout Nel’s life, as it metastasizes throughout Nel’s body and relationship. Nel’s attempts to achieve agency through her connection with her mother, Sula, and Jude all fail.

Generational trauma is also evidenced in the Peace family. Eva Peace, the matriarch of the family, suffers personal trauma at the hands of her womanizing husband, BoyBoy, who abandons her and their three children: “He did whatever he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third. When he left in November, Eva had \$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel” (32). Her sense of loss leaves her very much like Shadrack after the war—isolated, dazed, and confused. Years later, when BoyBoy comes back, she is still grappling with her feelings: “When Eva got the word that he [BoyBoy] was on his way, she made some lemonade. She had



no idea what she would do or feel during that encounter. Would she cry? Cut his throat, beg him to make love to her? She couldn't imagine" (35). Her oscillation between feelings of anger and love are evidence of the dialectic of trauma. She attempts to bring some sense of order to the shattered image of her marriage to BoyBoy by deciding to hate him. In hating BoyBoy, Eva can verbalize her past trauma and recover at least some functionality: "Hating BoyBoy, she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities" (36). Consequently, Eva confines herself to her bedroom and limits her life to raising her children. Similar to the Wright women, Eva wishes to guard against trauma and its shameful effects, and therefore withdraws from making any meaningful human connections. Schreiber puts it this way: "As the matriarch of that family, Eva is led by her trauma—her husband's abandonment and dire poverty" (86). As result of her trauma, she is detached from her own feelings and the motherly ties to her children, often feeling emotions of both love and hate for them.

This is evident in the murder of her son Plum. When the reader first encounters Plum, Morrison skillfully disassociates the act of plum's murder from its context so that the reader can possibly experience the act of murder without an understanding of the reason for the act. Later, it is through Eva's trauma-infused narrative that the reader is told why she feels justified in killing her son. Her reasons have as much to do with her shame of Plum as they do her love for him. She tells Hannah that "...he wanted to crawl back into my womb and well...I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn't space in my womb. And he was crawlin' back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the

time” (71). Not only does this suggest the shame of an incestuous relationship and the shame and contempt Eva has for Plum for not being a man, but also there is a sense that Eva sees this murderous act as an act of love. She embraces Plum before she kills him. She tells Hannah it is an attempt to redeem Plum: “I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man” (72). Clearly, this feeling of shame and redemption that Eva exhibits is an illustration of her attempt to order her experience and Plum’s as well. His death is told from his perspective and paired with the beauty of the fire:

He felt twilight. Now there seemed to be some kind of wet light traveling over his legs and stomach with a deeply attractive smell. It wound itself—this wet light—all about him, splashing and running into his skin. He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said. Knowing that it was so he closed his eyes and sank back into the bright hole of sleep. (47)

Plum’s actual condition is that he has come home from the war and is a heroin addict. He is a shell of himself, useless to everyone. In this context, Eva’s murder of Plum is a purging of his shame but also a release from the hell that Plum experiences during the war. In Trudier Harris’s *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, assesses Eva’s murder of her son like this: “The fire that Eva sets to kill Plum succeeds in destroying him...the burning negates Eva’s willingness to endure her son’s suffering,

and, from Hannah's point of view, it negates motherly affection" (80). The fire represents the all-consuming nature of dynamic trauma. Dynamic trauma, left untreated, consumes its host rendering him or her detached and in a state of paralysis. Unlike the Wright women, who mask their traumas and attempt to fit into society by finding acceptable men to marry, Eva Peace transgresses social norms. She is hostile towards men, making men the object of her contempt and suffer for the abandonment she experienced from BoyBoy.

Eva manages the trauma of being abandoned by her husband and left in poverty with three children but not without the steep price of being physically maimed. When she abandons her children and returns a year and a half later with only one leg and a new black pocketbook, it is rumored by the townspeople that she may have had her leg cut off to claim the insurance money. The physical trauma of losing a limb signifies not only the devastating effects of loss because of the violence Eva experiences but also the transformative and dynamic nature of trauma itself. Eva is never the same. Eva loses part of herself physically and mentally. This traumatic experience consumes her and the sense of abandonment continues and is insidiously passed on to her children, specifically Hannah, and later Sula. Eva's narrative illustrates the bodily dynamic of trauma and how surviving trauma often comes at a mental physical price. Its insidious nature grows and repeats itself in future generations when it is left unchecked.

Just as Eva is abandoned by BoyBoy, she in turn abandons her children, subsequently traumatizing them in much the same way she was traumatized. She does not provide a safe place for her children where they can develop with a positive sense of who they are. Her daughter Pearl escapes to Flint, Michigan arguably in hopes of establishing agency and moving beyond her traumatic past by reconstructing her identity

in a different place. Her son Plum is unable to recover from the trauma of war and becomes addicted to drugs.

Eva's other daughter, Hannah, best exemplifies how trauma is passed from mother to daughter. The traumatic sense of loss that abandonment fosters is illustrated in Hannah. She senses that something is missing from her relationship with her mother when she asks, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (Morrison 67). Hannah's question implies that she is not sure if they were ever loved and is also more complex than would appear. Hannah is questioning the familial ties that bind a mother to a child and give a child a sense of security and identity. Eva's response is telling: "Eva, who was just sitting there fanning herself with the cardboard fan from Mr. Hodges' funeral parlor, listened to the silence that followed Hannah's words, then said 'Scat!'" (67). Eva's silence is deafening and reveals the disconnectedness present in her and Hannah's relationship. Eva's traumatic loss of BoyBoy—the loss of love and safety—is imprinted on her daughter. Hannah marries Rekus, but after his death, is never without "the attentions" of a man (42). She reacts to trauma by connecting with men sexually for the feeling of being attached without the responsibility of anyone's heart: "Hannah was fastidious about whom she slept with. She would fuck practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment" (43-44). Hannah's sexual appetite for married and single men alike makes her an outcast in the community. She fulfills her need for connection through sex: "What she wanted, after Rekus died, and what she succeeded in having more often than not, was some touching everyday" (44). Unfortunately, sex is Hannah's only way of connecting to a sense of herself. She lacks the ability to connect on a meaningful level because of the

generational trauma she suffers. Consequently, this lack is in turn transferred to her daughter Sula. Just as Hannah questions her mother's love, recognizing something is missing, Sula is faced with the same question as she overhears her mother Hannah say, "...I love Sula. I just don't like her" (57). This off-hand remark sends Sula flying up the stairs. She recognizes there is no safe place or anyone whom she can rely on to nurture her. Sula, like her mother and grandmother, are marked with a traumatizing sense of abandonment and loss. After hearing these words from her mother, Sula recognizes that she has no familial support or sense of safety and seeks the support and safety she needs and desires in Nel.

Sula experiences a sense of abandonment by her mother that leaves her detached from others, and unable to build healthy, meaningful relationships. Sula is first marked by trauma when she overhears that her mother loves her but does not like her. Shortly after this experience, she accidentally swings Chicken Little into the lake where he drowns. It is evident in the death of Chicken Little and later the death of her mother, Hannah, that Sula has little to no feelings of empathy for or attachment to others. She does not move to save Chicken Little as he drowns which serves as an affirmation that she has no one to rely on, not even her own self: "The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water" (61). The death of Chicken Little is one of the primary traumas that haunts Sula but also connects her fate with Shadrack's fate. Both characters witness traumatic events and attempt to negotiate the dialectic of trauma in secrecy. The word "Always" which Shadrack says to Sula to assuage her guilt also represents Shadrack's acknowledgement of an act too

overwhelming to describe. The word “Always” signals to Sula that he will keep Sula’s involvement in Chicken Little’s death a secret. This secret comes to represent the unspeakable trauma of Chicken Little’s death that they both witnessed but cannot speak about. It represents the secrecy of traumatic experience and its permanence. While it is hidden from the outside world, it will always continue to be relived in the individual, producing neurotic behavior: “Once Sula ignores them [communal values] and moves into a realm of her own unrestrained seeking and exploration, she is forever outside the world view of the Bottom” (Harris 77). Shadrack and Sula are both outcasts, unsuccessful in attempting to negotiate trauma without aid or assistance from the community that has vilified them.

Another event Sula experiences that illustrates trauma and its effects is the death of her mother, Hannah. Even when Sula’s mother is burning, Sula is standing on the porch seemingly not terrified but curious. Sula is outside of herself, detached physically and mentally. She does not move. There is no one to rely on, not even herself. This marks Sula with another traumatic experience in which she recognizes she cannot even rely upon herself. These traumatizing experiences allow for the metastasizing effects of dynamic trauma to invade all facets of Sula’s life. At the age of twelve, Sula’s psychological development is stunted by these events, and a sense of herself is lost forever: “The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow” (118-119). Because Sula has no “center” and no one outside of herself from whom she can gather aspects of herself, her life becomes an experiment. Sula is willing to cross boundaries because those lines which distinguished safety from danger

had already been erased through her traumatic past. As she gets older the trauma grows into other areas of her life. Much like her mother, Hannah, Sula has sex with whomever she pleases. She learns from her mother how to detach sex from the context of a relationship and garners the same reputation of sleeping with married and single men alike. Sula's promiscuity can be seen as an experimental way to construct her own identity. In this sense, she is not looking to connect with others through a sexual union, but rather to find out who she is, what she likes and dislikes.

The trauma Sula experiences psychologically continues to grow and manifests itself physically. The physical trauma Sula inflicts upon herself when she cuts off the tip of her finger to protect Nel illustrates physical detachment and is representative of her being in pieces. Sula's self-mutilation is a physical response to a perceived threat. Because of psychological traumas she has experienced, she cannot see beyond the perceived threat of the boys chasing Nel and chooses to sacrifice a piece of herself to protect Nel. In doing so she also repeats her grandmother's act of self-mutilation. In both Sula and her grandmother, these traumatic acts of violence can be seen as a means of protection but also an act of rebellion. Sula's grandmother cuts off her leg for the insurance money as an act of protection and survival. The grandmother sacrifices a piece of herself so that her family may survive. Her actions can be viewed as protecting her family against a racist economic system that would have her and her family on the street. Similarly, Sula is protecting her friend from a perceived threat. Sula's act of cutting off the tip of her finger is traumatic but can also be seen as an act of rebellion because she demonstrates her strength and power to inflict harm, even on her own body. In Amanda Putnam's article *Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison's*

*The Bluest Eye, Sula, Beloved, and a Mercy*, Putnam argues that this violence has some redeeming qualities, misdirected as it may be:

The violence—sometimes verbal, but more frequently physical—is often an attempt to create unique solutions to avoid further victimization. Thus, violence itself becomes an act of rebellion, a form of resistance to oppressive power. The choice of violence—often rendered upon those within their own community and family—redirects powerlessness and transforms these characters, redefining them as compelling dominant women. However, their transformation often has multidimensional repercussions for them and those with whom they have chosen to be violent. (25)

The violent and traumatic acts committed by these women are in response to traumatic experience which then they are able to survive. This cycle of violence can then be a coping mechanism passed down from mother to child. This facilitates the transference of trauma from one generation to the next.

Like a broken record that skips and replays the same tune, traumatic experiences are repetitive, and passed from generation to generation. They are replayed in both the Wright and the Peace households as background experiences not to be questioned. Helene Wright is forced to relive the humiliating experience of racial discrimination and the sexual past of her mother. Both traumas damage her ability to establish agency and lead to detachment and paralysis, not only in her life but also in her child's life. In the Peace household, abandonment is the catalyst for dynamic trauma, which renders the



lives of Eva and her offspring detached from one another and paralyzed by their individual traumatic experiences.

The only meaningful connection between characters that offers some hope of moving beyond or managing traumatic experience is the relationship between Nel and Sula. On her trip to her grandmother's house, Nel claims herself as her own: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me." Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear" (Morrison 28). This display of agency is perhaps what allows her to seek support outside of her family and find it in Sula. For her part, Sula is also a lost soul searching for some way to be nurtured. In this way, the two girls seem to complement each other. While they are both marked by generational trauma and the trauma they experience together, whether it is Chicken Little's death or the bodily trauma of Sula cutting off part of her finger, they seem to find refuge in each other and are able to establish some sense of collective agency at least for a time. As Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber notes in *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*: "Sula turns to Nel to create a sense of self. Each girl mirrors a firm identity for the other and they had 'difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's' (88). Nel and Sula connect with each other and see themselves in such a way that their agency seems attainable:

It was like getting the use of an eye back. Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle, and a little raunchy. Sula, whose past she had lived through and with whom the present was a constant

sharing of perceptions. Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself. (95)

Their relationship allows them to expand the possibilities of their lives and allows them to perceive themselves beyond the traumas they have experienced. As adults, unchecked traumas mute into dynamic trauma and interrupt their adult lives. Each person becomes isolated and imprisoned by his or her individual traumatic experience. Sula inherits her mother's sexual desires for ultimately the same purpose—to fill the void of loneliness. Hannah has sex because she longs to be touched, to be connected. Sula has sex to lessen the pain of being alone. This truth exposes the depths of Sula's abandonment by her mother. This becomes manifest when Sula sleeps with Nel's husband Jude. This infidelity forces Nel to relive the shame she felt when the soldiers looked at her mother with contempt and the white train porter humiliated them. Nel ultimately becomes a prisoner of these fragmented thoughts and feelings concerning who she is, further damaging any hope of agency she might have. Because both women suffer from their own individual trauma and from the isolation and detachment from community, they are only able to comprehend each other's actions in the context of their own unchecked individual trauma. Nel feels betrayed and cannot understand why Sula sleeps with her husband. She views Sula's actions as a betrayal of their friendship and proof that she is truly alone and further isolated from the one person to whom she felt connected.

Sula, on the other hand, is unable to see past her desires to feel something—anything—even if it means having sex with her best friend's husband. When Nel confronts her about sleeping with Jude, Sula's response shows a lack of empathy for Nel: “What you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such

good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" (145). For Sula, sex with Jude is self-affirming and not about attempt to connect with others as Carolyn Jones points out: "Sula's sleeping with Jude is not personal; it is merely another of Sula's 'experiences.' Sexuality, for Sula, is not the attempt to meet with an 'other,' but with herself. It is an attempt to find that center that she has lost" (622). Sula's trauma of being abandoned by those who should have loved her the most, including her lover Ajax, who leaves her detached and in pieces, contributes to her inability to emote empathy and remorse to Nel. Sula is vulnerable to Ajax because she actually loves him. Ajax allows Sula to be herself. When she makes love to him, she thinks: "I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. But how much? How much water to keep the loam moist? And how much loam will I need to keep my water still? And when do the two make mud?" (131). Sula unfortunately tries to possess Ajax; as a result, he abandons her. *Sula and Beloved: Images of Cain in the Novels of Toni Morrison* by Carolyn M. Jones confirms the absence of Ajax and its devastating effect for Sula: "The loss of Ajax, and with him Sula's one attempt at joining with another in marriage and with the community of Medallion, destroys Sula" (623). Ultimately, the trauma of abandonment repeated in the lives of Eva and Hannah, is now visited upon Sula as well.

By the end of the novel, dynamic trauma has left all of these women with a damaged sense of agency that renders them detached and paralyzed. Sula dies alone in her bedroom isolated from Nel and the community. Sula, very similar to Shadrack, is seen as a pariah, and her behavior is viewed as dangerous. She and the community are symbiotic parts of a whole. When Sula dies, the community loses its resident villain, but it also loses its cohesion. Consequently, there is no one to keep the community together

and the community unravels. This is depicted in the last chapter, as people live in separate houses, watching separate televisions. Nel is also isolated at the end of the novel, recognizing too late that Sula is the only person she truly connects with and that her relationship with Jude is not the love she was truly missing: “‘All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.’ And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. ‘We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something. ‘O Lord Sula, ‘she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl’” (*Sula* 174). This illustrates the sense of profound loss that Nel feels and the emotional attachment to Sula she verbalizes. Nel is once again alone in the world with no sense of her own self other than what the community deems acceptable. Both lives are constricted. Sula’s life is physically confined to the bed and later death, while Nel is mentally confined to abandonment and loss.

Toni Morrison’s *Sula* not only demonstrates the effects of dynamic trauma on oppressed African-American women, but also the communal traumatic effects of Jim Crow discrimination and its consequences on African-American narratives. Morrison implies that the cultural trauma experienced by African Americans damages their ability to be active change agents in their own lives. Kenneth Ponds article, *The Trauma of Racism: America’s Original Sin*, suggests that one of the responses to racial events leaves African American stressed and can cause paralysis in situations: “Freeze is an involuntary, biological response used as a last resort for survival. It is a state of shutdown and disconnect while waiting for the threat to pass” (3). In *Sula*, most characters react to forced environments of war, poverty, and racism and so are consumed with surviving trauma that they become paralyzed by the experience and detached from community.

To create narrative is to reflect on one's own experience and establish a representational self. For too long that representational self has been shaped through the eyes of a master narrative outside of African-American culture and community. In other words, African Americans view themselves as the "other." They see themselves from a distorted perspective outside of themselves. Dynamic trauma, as it grows and infects various aspects of human growth and development, constricts and fragments African-American lives. Dynamic trauma also indicates a failure to witness. A major element of being a witness to trauma is being able to express it and testify to one's own experience. Morrison's characters fail to witness to, or testify to their own individual traumas, which are deemed secretive and shameful. Tragically, the internalization and repression of traumatic hurt and pain serves to strengthen the damaging psychological and physiological effects in the individual. Failure to acknowledge traumatic experience calls into question the very experience of its existence and one's own existence as well.

The community plays a significant role as witness also. The proper role of the community is to listen to the testimony of trauma and validate the experience of the individual. If the community suffers from trauma as well, then there is no one to demonstrate what healthy agency looks like. People have difficulty expressing the stories that are too terrible to relate, particularly if the speaker is unable to be a witness or there is no community to witness the testimony because of its own trauma. Being unable to be a witness to one's own historical narrative is tantamount to identity erasure. In telling stories about communal experiences associated with trauma, Morrison becomes a witness who reshapes a past narrative from the point of view of African Americans. This is an

exercise in collective agency that leads to future and limitless possibilities concerning identity which her characters otherwise never get to realize.

An interesting motif that occurs throughout the novel is the emphasis placed on eyes and seeing. Morrison mentions eyes at least 130 times over the course of the novel. Sula and Nel are described as having one eye between them (40). Nel regards her reconnection with Sula to be like having an eye back and being able to see things differently (97). Nel and Sula are both concerned that someone has seen what happened when Sula accidentally whirled Chicken Little in the lake. Morrison's focus on eyes and seeing is twofold. The eyes become the window through which the individual sees and is seen as subject and object. Subjectivity and objectivity are key elements in narrative construction and identity formation. They signify the inner and outer, the individual and the community, the world that comes together to signify meaning. They are an important component that makes one self-aware and conscious of the outside world. Seeing is an act through which one is able to experience the self and distinguish self from others. Being a witness involves being able to see and relate accurately what one has seen.

Unfortunately, the characters in *Sula* are imprisoned and isolated in their own experiences. They cannot *see* clearly because they are overwhelmed by traumatic events and their identities are founded on hostile and disfigured gazes which they have internalized. Morrison, as an author, is attempting to heal those who have been harmed by trauma and give voice to the ineffable traumatic experiences of the past so that African Americans may be integrated into a historical narrative that establishes African Americans at the center of their own stories, particularly African-American women. Claude Pruitt writes in her article *Circling Meaning in Toni Morrison's Sula*: "*Sula's*

circles of sorrow mark the site of black women's history at the center of black community, a center that had been denigrated and lost within black culture and was, Morrison seems to indicate, in serious need of revision" (116). *Sula* can also be regarded as a cautionary tale that illustrates the damaging effects of trauma that often transform into dynamic trauma. From another perspective, Morrison is highlighting not only the various forms of trauma caused by racism but also implying ways to move beyond the trauma.

All of the traumatic experiences have some commonalities that allow them to metastasize. One such commonality is that there is no intervention. No one intercedes on the part of Shadrack to assist him. No one steps in to help Eva, Hannah, or Helene. Had someone assisted Shadrack with his symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, perhaps he could have been more easily integrated into the community. Perhaps Morrison is implying that within any community people have to be willing to care for one another in a way that fosters positive identity.

Another similarity in all of the traumas is that safe places are essential for growth and development. Shadrack is placed in the context of war, while the Bottom community is placed in the context of a hostile racist environment that is dangerous for African Americans during the Jim Crow era. Homes are not even safe. Sula hears that her mother does not like her, and she sees, outside of her home, her mother burned alive before her very eyes. Again, there are no safe places where people are nurtured and can foster a sense of identity that increases self-esteem. Also there are no long lasting, meaningful connections with people. All of the relationships deteriorate into isolationist existence. Morrison could be hinting that relationships that are long-lasting and not

destructive help to enable agency. This is clearly evident in the relationship between Nel and Sula. They help one another to discover who they are. When their relationship deteriorates, they lose the ability to grow and one dies and the other becomes isolated.

While forming relationships may be a prescriptive measure that can be used to negotiate the harmful effects of trauma, it is important to underscore that to recover from trauma is virtually impossible. To recover would suggest that Shadrack is able to be who he was before the traumatic experience of the war, as if there were a way to reverse the effects of traumatic experience. Traumatic experiences are life-altering and transforming agents. Sula may be able to move beyond Chicken Little's death. But she cannot bring him back. The loss is profound and irrecoverable. Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* is ultimately an insightful, probing view of dynamic trauma, its insidious effects and the price a community pays for lack of healing.



## CHAPTER IV

### *SONG OF SOLOMON: THE ABSENCE OF PRESENCE IN THE DEAD FAMILY*

Much of the focus in *Sula* is on the traumatic experiences of African-American women, particularly the protagonist Sula Peace. In Toni Morrison's subsequent novel *Song of Solomon* written in 1977, the damaging effects of dynamic trauma are also illustrated in an African-American community and particularly through the life of male protagonist, Milkman Dead. *Song of Solomon* is the story of Milkman Dead's quest for communal and personal identity amidst communal, generational, and personal trauma. Milkman is searching for the meaning of life beyond his father's obsession with material possessions. At the beginning of the novel, he is detached from himself, estranged from his family, his community, and ancestral roots. However, with the assistance of Pilate (his aunt), Milkman embarks on a quest that enables him to connect to his ancestral past and gain understanding of himself.

The events of the novel take place over thirty years and are divided into two parts. Part One is set in an unnamed town in Michigan and details Milkman's life from birth to his early thirties. This part centers on Milkman's spiritual crisis and purposeless life as a young African-American male caught between his father's materialistic lifestyle and his Aunt's traditional values. In one of many flashbacks, the reader learns that Milkman's father, Macon Jr., and Macon Jr.'s sister, Pilate, ran away from home after their father

was murdered for protecting his land. When both Macon Jr. and Pilate end up in the same unnamed Michigan town, Macon Jr. chooses not to speak to his sister, whom he feels is an embarrassment to his social standing in the town. Part One ends with Milkman's decision to leave Michigan in search of Pilate's secret gold—Milkman's inheritance. Macon Jr. is sure that Pilate has hidden this inherited treasure in one of the many places Pilate lived previously.

Part Two begins with Milkman's arrival in Danville, Pennsylvania, where his paternal grandfather built a farm for which he was killed. Unable to find Pilate's gold in Danville and prompted by the mysterious stories surrounding his ancestors, Milkman traces his ancestry to the town of Shalimar, Virginia, where he meets his father's people and discovers the true spiritual meaning of his inheritance. The novel's open-ended conclusion focuses on Milkman's acceptance of his heritage and personal identity as he physically and metaphorically flies across Solomon's Leap.

In constructing this novel, Morrison draws from a Yoruba folktale about a "flying African" who empowers enslaved Africans to escape slavery by flying back to Africa. This folktale is rich in its symbolic significance. It uses the act of flight in several ways. The act of flight signifies escape from oppression, specifically slavery. Flight, then represents a response to traumatic occurrence. As Carl Jung suggests in *Man and His Symbols* flight represents, "Man's need for liberation from any state of being which is too immature, too fixed or final" (146). It implies a desire to flee dangerous circumstances that threaten one's existence. Not only is flight representative of escape from oppression, it is also seen as a desire to return to one's ancestral roots. Within the context of the folktale, Africans do not simply wish to escape oppression; they wish to

return to their homeland. They desire to reclaim what was geographically and culturally stolen. This is critical to identity formation. In Patricia San Jose Rico's article "Flying Away: Voluntary Diaspora and The Spaces of Trauma in The African-American Short Story," Yi-Fu Tuan rightly assess the connection between geography and culture: "A person has specific feelings towards a certain place 'because it is home, the locus of memories, and the means of gaining a livelihood' (as cited in Price, 28). Those feelings, that sense of 'topophilia' is what links individuals to their homeland and what helps them construct a sense of identity" (69). Thirdly, flight expresses change—passage from physical, earthly existence to spiritual existence as expressed in many Negro spiritual songs such as "I'll Fly Away." In this way, flight symbolizes being in transit while being suspended between two worlds. Rico underscores the importance transition and returning home have in shaping African-American culture:

This symbolic return to the original place is explained also by the profound cultural symbolism of the "Middle Passage." Inasmuch as water (in the form of the Atlantic ocean) was the link between Africa and America in the aforementioned slaves' transatlantic voyage, it has stayed in the African-Americans' communal memory as a bridge between their original homeland and their new imposed home and as a symbol of change. (70)

Water is often characterized as a change agent. Similarly, to be in flight, one is suspended between the world below and the world above. This idea easily lends itself to conceptions of heaven and hell and other binary constructs. Morrison is keenly aware of these tropes and makes use of them in this novel.

Just as in *Sula*, in *Song of Solomon* various forms of trauma inform character behavior and novel structure. Morrison also uses specific elements of the trauma narrative in *Song of Solomon*, and they are evident in the structure of the novel as well. The dialectic of trauma, as Judith Herman describes in *Trauma and Recovery*, is one element clearly exhibited throughout the novel. There are moments when characters seem suspended in time, between the past and the present, as they relive traumatic experiences. These various traumas are unchecked and culminate in dynamic trauma. The dynamic trauma evidenced in *Song of Solomon* damages the agency of practically every character, ruins their sense of self, and disallows a meaningful connection between themselves and their ancestors.

The novel begins with the “flight/suicide” of an insurance agent caught in the middle of a racialized world from which he wants to escape. The suicide of the insurance agent, Mr. Robert Smith, is the first communal trauma Morrison brings to the reader’s attention. In Mr. Smith’s declaration to fly from “mercy to the other side of Lake Superior” (3), Morrison introduces the ancestral myth of the flying Africans—a theme central to the story. With Smith’s flight, the reader is witness to a flight very much like the flying African. Smith flees or takes flight amidst the isolation and discrimination he feels as an African-American man caught between two worlds. As an insurance agent, whose house is no better than other houses in the community, he is isolated from the African-American community and treated with contempt for collecting their monthly premiums for the insurance company. African Americans view him as an irritation: “I knew it. Soon’s I get two dimes back to back, here you come. More regular than the reaper’...They kidded him, abused him, told their children to tell him they were out sick

or gone to Pittsburgh” (8). Although Smith is not seen as part of the African-American community, he is a member of the Seven Days, a militant African-American group that is willing to kill for its community. As J. Brooks Bouson points out in *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Mr. Smith suffers the traumatic effects of racism: “While the initial description of Mr. Smith evokes the shaming stereotype of the mad black man, the narrative later explains That Mr. Smith is a member of the terrorist organization, the Seven Days, and thus reveals that the cause of his ‘madness’ [trauma] is the racist violence perpetuated against African Americans” (79). Subsequently, Mr. Smith is disconnected from the community as much as he is part of the community. On one hand, he is part of the oppressor’s world as an agent and symbol of economic oppression in the African-American community. On the other hand, he is part of the oppressed world, as an African-American man who is willing to kill White people on behalf of the African-American community. In his inability to reconcile both worlds, Mr. Smith does not fly. Instead, he plummets to his apparent death.

Morrison punctuates Mr. Smith’s brief introduction and death with the description of Mercy Hospital and Mains Avenue. Mercy Hospital is known to the African-American community as No Mercy Hospital because of its discriminatory policies against African Americans. Renaming the hospital reflects two worlds divided by race. While the hospital should be a healing place for the sick, it is viewed as a source of rejection and a reminder of African-American disenfranchisement. Put simply, it is a public symbol of racial discrimination, a place where African Americans in need of medical attention can get no healing. In addition, that Mr. Smith’s suicide takes place a top “No Mercy” hospital suggests the destructive force of racism.

Within the first few lines of the novel, Morrison directs readers to the details of “Not Doctor Street” and its sordid history. The African-American community unofficially names the street “Doctor Street” as a sense of pride when the first African-American doctor moves into the all-white neighborhood. They later change the name to “Not Doctor Street” to please white public officials: “It gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street, and were inclined to call Charity Hospital at its northern end No Mercy Hospital...” (4). This further illustrates the clash between two worlds defined by race. In an attempt to survive white authority’s power to name and assign value, the African-American community responds assigning value through naming, albeit unofficial. This tension between worlds further echoes the paradox that it is Doctor Street, but Not Doctor Street. The trauma of racism works in this way. It calls into question one’s reality, one’s existence, and one’s ability to name and express reality, particularly if others are committed to denying one’s reality, existence, and meaning. The act of naming the street Not Doctor Street acknowledges a white world willfully denying African-American agency, and yet at the same time, subversively assuming authority where one is not welcome. Michael Rothberg explains the significance of naming in “Dead Letter Office: Conspiracy, Trauma, and Song of Solomon’s Posthumous Communication:”

In linking property and propriety in a discourse in which the Not Doctor Street passage has already suggested the importance of proper and "appropriate" names, Song of Solomon subtly encodes slavery's legacies in the familial and social life of twentieth-century African Americans. While the novel depicts much of the black community subverting the

power of the proper name—as in the signi-fyin(g) of Not Doctor Street and No Mercy Hospital—other characters, like Macon, remember slavery but forget its lessons, or are unable to translate its lessons into the new arena of economic and social relations of the post-slavery era. (510)

This dialectic of trauma, this back and forth between two opposing ideals, sets the stage for Mr. Smith's flight/suicide, which could be viewed as spiritual flight or an escape through physical death. Ultimately, Mr. Smith lacks significant familial and cultural ties that ground him in positive and meaningful connection to the community: "He never had a woman that any of them knew about and said nothing in church but an occasional 'Amen.' He never beat up anybody and he wasn't seen after dark, so they thought he was probably a nice man" (8). Trauma, in the form of disconnection, infects Mr. Smith, and thus develops into a collective experience indicative of what occurs to the community: "He [Smith] was heavily associated with illness and death, neither of which was distinguishable from the brown picture of the North Carolina Mutual Life Building on the back of their yellow cards" (8). Smith, like his community is sick and near death. At the point of Smith's flight and subsequent death, Milkman is born. The death of Mr. Smith provides the traumatic context in which Milkman, at the age of four, learns he can't fly: "The next day a colored baby was born inside Mercy for the first time. Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself" (Morrison 9). The inability to fly—to flee danger, to return and connect with his past—marks Milkman as one disconnected. The similarities between Mr. Smith, Milkman, the myth of the flying African, and Solomon is the theme

of flight in the face of communal trauma, the trauma of racism: “Milkman’s propensity for flight or the alternate reality of the novel; rather, Smith’s takeoff from Mercy Hospital appears to echo the flight of Solomon (Shalimar)” (Bouson 70). Morrison seems to suggest, through these male characters, that one cannot fly without familial, communal ties, and a connection to an ancestral past which helps to shape one’s identity. Mr. Smith’s attempted flight is indicative of the plight of the African-American community in the midst of communal trauma.

Later in the novel, readers learn that Milkman’s great grandfather, Solomon, was believed to have escaped slavery by flying back to Africa, leaving his wife and children behind. Slavery precipitates his flight back to Africa and away from his family which leaves them in chaos and disorder. Communal trauma is reflected not only in his abandonment of his family and the overwhelming sense of loss the family sustains, but also in the disruption of familial and communal ties that shape identity and nurture agency. Communal trauma is exhibited as an indirect result of racism and a direct result of Solomon’s absence from his family. The opening scene and appropriation of the folktale of the flying African provide communal context for the Dead family and Milkman’s personal quest.

The traumas that the characters in *Song of Solomon* experience, whether personal, communal, or generational, birth consequences that are detrimental. They all damage agency and lead to detachment and paralysis. Milkman’s friend, Guitar Bains experiences personal trauma as a result of his father’s death. He recalls how

his mother had smiled and shown that willingness to love the man who was responsible for dividing his father up throughout eternity. It wasn’t



the divinity from the foreman's wife that made him sick. That came later. It was the fact that instead of life insurance, the sawmill owner gave his mother forty dollars 'to tide you and them kids over,' and she took it happily and bought each of them a big peppermint stick on the very day of the funeral. (226)

The death of Guitar's father is traumatic in several ways. The meaninglessness of his father's life to white people is clear to Guitar when, instead of insurance money, his mother is given forty dollars. For a son to lose his father in such traumatic fashion is devastating. His father's memory is reduced to a few dollars. Racism exacerbates his trauma because a black man's life is given no value. Ultimately, for guitar, his father's death reflects his own life as being meaningless. Another way his father's death is traumatizing is the way he chooses to remember his mother. He cannot forgive her for her seemingly gentle acceptance of what the sawmill owner offers them. The white divinity candy offered to the children is significant because it represents, on one hand, White authority and, on the other, the meaningless value placed on African-American lives. Together, White supremacy, called divinity candy, is symbolically offered as recompense for his father's black life. Guitar associates his mother's acceptance of the money and candy as an act of subservience. When his mother leaves shortly after his father's death, he is once again abandoned: "She just ran away. My aunt took care of us...it was hard for me to latch on to a woman. Because I thought if I loved anything it would die" (311). The instability and abandonment Guitar suffers is traumatizing and makes establishing relationships with others difficult. Schreiber puts it this way: "Deserting the family in a time of grief, Guitar's mother increases the family's stress by

disrupting a secure attachment for her children, and the movement from caretaker to caretaker compounds Guitar's trauma of loss" (96-97). As Guitar develops and his initial trauma grows, his profound sense of personal and the communal loss is later exacerbated by Emmitt Till's death. Guitar takes up arms against White supremacy. He is disconnected from those closest to him. For Guitar, nonviolence will not suffice; there are no boundaries that cannot be crossed. Consequently, he joins the Seven Days, an African American extremist group "trying to make a world where one day white people will think before they lynch" (Morrison 161). By joining the Seven Days, Guitar is attempting to make some sense out of a chaotic existence where an African-American boy can lose his life for something as insignificant as whistling at a white woman. All life seems to lose its meaning for Guitar when he eventually turns on his best friend Milkman and wants to kill him from fear that Milkman has discovered a stash of gold he will not share. Ultimately Guitar is consumed by dynamic trauma which leaves him detached and in a state of paralysis, unable to move beyond the trauma of race.

For the moment, while Guitar is remembering his father's death, time appears to stop, and Guitar is paralyzed as he mentally relives the events too terrible to relate about his father: "In some intertextual moments, the past flickers forth, as in traumatic flashbacks. But such flashbacks are also always moments of risk, as trauma-tized memory threatens to override or displace historical occurrence" (Rothberg 506). The impact of trauma is evident when Guitar recounts the look on his mother's face after the mill owner gives her forty dollars for his father's accidental death. Guitar goes into trance as he is talking to Milkman: "'Once. Just once,'" said Guitar. And he remembered anew how his mother smiled when the white man handed her four ten-dollar bills. More than gratitude

was showing in her eyes...Her husband was sliced in half and boxed backward” (226). Morrison then takes readers into Guitar’s recollection of what happened and what he feels. As he finishes thinking about his father’s violent and traumatic death, he comes to repeat the words: “Once,” he said. ‘Just once” (227). The trauma is reflected in Guitar’s repeating of the word “once.” To repeat a word or phrase, as if paralyzed, illustrates his inability to express his thoughts through words, a common symptom of trauma:

Guitar’s trauma is not only psychological, but physiological as well. As Guitar relives the death of his father, he has a bodily reaction and becomes nauseated. Thinking of the candy, he “felt the nausea all over again” (226). He associates sweets, like the peppermint his mother gives him on the day of his father’s funeral, to the look on his mother’s face: “his mother had smiled and shown that willingness to love the man who was responsible for dividing his father up throughout eternity” (226). Ultimately, the trauma Guitar suffers damages his agency. In other words, he is unable to construct a narrative of self on his own terms. The worthlessness of African-American life in White America teaches Guitar that his own life is, therefore worthless. Consequently, joining the Seven Days and choosing to destroy innocent, his worldview is further constricted. Racial trauma drives him, and he is unable to balance the meaning of life and inevitable death. The trauma Guitar experiences evolves into dynamic trauma as it invades his mind and body, rendering him paralyzed emotionally and mentally, unable to feel either for himself or others.

Another character who suffers from personal trauma is Milkman’s mother, Ruth. When Ruth’s mother dies, she looks to her father for love and attention. She becomes the

woman of the house, strengthening the bond between father and daughter. They have what could be considered an incestuous relationship:

Fond as he was for his only child, useful as she was in house since his wife had died, lately he had begun to chafe under her devotion. Her steady beam of love was unsettling, and she had never dropped those expressions of affection that had been lovable in her childhood. The good-night kiss was itself a masterpiece of slow wittedness on her part and discomfort on his. At sixteen, she still insisted on having him come to her at night, sit on her bed, exchange a few pleasantries, and plant a kiss on her lips...More probably it was the ecstasy that always seemed to be shining in Ruth's face when he bent to kiss her—an ecstasy he felt inappropriate to the occasion. (23)

Ruth's relationship with her father exhibits traits of Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. Freud suggests that just as boys are psychologically attached to their mothers, girls are too, however. As a consequence of her mother's death, Ruth transfers this primal connection to her father, and a physical, emotional, and sexual bond is formed that makes her father uncomfortable, even though he continues to engage in intimate behavior that seems inappropriate for a father and daughter. Ruth's relationship with her father is particularly problematic for Macon Dead Jr., as he believes Ruth's relationship was indeed sexual and refuses to have sex with Ruth as a result. When Macon Dead Jr. completely withdraws from Ruth, the action further traumatizes her. She has lost her mother, her father, and now her husband. She is desperate to be touched and loved: "...I thought I'd really die if I had to live that way. With nobody touching me, or even

looking as though they'd like to touch me" (125). In a conversation with Pilate about her marital problems, she and Pilate decide that she should have another baby (for her husband, a son). Ruth, having lost her mother and father, the primary nurturers and love givers in her life, faces living in a world without validation or love. When Macon Jr. rejects her, it is yet another traumatic loss.

The traumatic experience of the lack of intimacy with her husband contributes to Ruth breast-feeding her son, Milkman, well beyond nursing age. Because of the emotional disconnect from her husband, she establishes a perverse connection from breast-feeding her child: "She felt him. His restraint, his courtesy, his indifference, all of which pushed her into fantasy. She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she was a cauldron spinning gold" (13). Ruth's profound sense of loss leads her to develop an unhealthy affection for her son. The breastfeeding continues until Freddie finds out and nicknames her son Milkman. Ruth's trauma begins with the profound sense of the loss of her mother and father; it continues when Macon rejects her; it solidifies when he refuses to touch her. When Macon wants her to abort their son, she becomes frightened of Macon and his intent to take away the one thing that validated her existence and should have brought them together:

Then the baby became the nausea caused by the half ounce of castor oil Macon made her drink, then a hot pot recently emptied of scalding water on which she sat, then a soapy enema, a knitting needle (she inserted only the tip, squatting in the bathroom, crying, afraid of the man who paced outside the door), and finally, when he punched her stomach (she had been

about to pick up his breakfast plate, when he looked at her stomach and punched it), she ran to Southside looking for Pilate. (131)

Ruth recalls this trauma when Hagar attempts to kill her only son. Her only safe haven is Pilate who assists her in saving Milkman from the murderous intentions of her husband. Ruth does not trust Macon and believes that he killed her father by throwing away his medicine. She oscillates between feelings of love for Macon Jr. and feelings of hate and disgust, as she believes he has murdered the only man who truly loved her. Ruth, consequently, becomes isolated, strangled by loneliness and longing for intimacy and growth. Ruth's trauma becomes dynamic in the sense that it metastasizes and affects various areas of Ruth's mental and physical state. Her traumatic sense of loss multiplies, diminishing the wisdom of her decisions regarding her son and reducing all of her other relationships.

Macon Jr.'s account of Ruth's relationship with her father suggests a sexual nature as he spies Ruth climbing into bed with her dead father and putting his fingers in her mouth. This act of necrophilia suggests Ruth's desperation and desire to be touched and commune with her only source of love. It also binds her to a past from which she never escapes. Her distrust of her husband is based on the narrative that Macon tried to murder her father. This traumatic narrative is thus incorrectly relayed to Milkman by his mother who seeks not a factual retelling account but the support of a traumatized ally. This is significant because traumatic memory shapes the traumatic narrative and, consequently, shapes a traumatic identity. As Judith Herman posits in *Trauma and Recovery*, "The imaginary of these events often crystallizes around a moment of betrayal, and it is this breach of trust which gives the intrusive images their intense emotional

power” (55). This “imaginary of events” is also evident in Ruth’s relationship with her son. Ruth attempts to fill the traumatic void within herself by having a child. Tragically, she recreates the inappropriate, perverse sexual relationship that she had with her own father with her son. She derives sexual pleasure from breast-feeding Milkman far beyond what would be considered normal. Ruth attempts to compensate for her overwhelming loss and rejection by returning to a safe past. She never moves beyond her loss and recreates trauma in her own son. Ruth never achieves agency because of the trauma she experiences. She is not of her own making but the daughter of Dr. Foster and the wife of Macon Dead. She says, “. . .I am a small woman. . .I don’t mean little; I mean small, and am small because I was pressed small” (124). Ruth is constricted in her possibilities. She is unable to enter the world as she struggles in her mind between the past and the present, leaving her without agency, without a sense of self or future. As the story progresses, the dynamic trauma exhibited in Ruth consumes her existence and becomes insurmountable as she is reduced to smaller version of herself.

Generational trauma is also exhibited in the Dead family. The African-American Folktale about the flying African, which ends with Solomon flying away from his family provides a context for Morrison’s novel. It begins with Solomon and is transmitted to his son Jake who then transmits it to Macon Jr. who transmits it to Milkman. The initial trauma of slavery that Solomon experiences causes him to take flight. In his flight with his son Jake, he drops him. This separation of father and son plants the seed for a profound sense of loss and abandonment in the child: “neither one of them knew their own father, Jake nor Sing” (322). Jake’s connection to Solomon is literally erased when a drunken clerk mistakenly ascribes Jake a new surname: Dead. Jake’s wife suggests that

he keep the name because it would perhaps erase the history of slavery: “Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out” (54). This willful denial of the past is a direct result of experienced trauma. As Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* suggests, “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (18). Jake Dead, subconscious carrier of a legacy, inadvertently participates in the erasure of his own familial legacy. Future generations, then have difficulty tracing their lineage. Morrison uses the word *dead* figuratively and literally to mark the trauma that occurs from generation to generation:

A literal slip of the pen handed to his father on a piece of paper and which he handed to his only son, and his son likewise handed on to his; Macon Dead who begat a second Macon Dead who married Ruth Foster (Dead) and begat Magdalene called Lena Dead and First Corinthians Dead and (when he least expected it) another Macon Dead, now known to the part of the world that mattered as Milkman Dead. And as if that were not enough, a sister named Pilate Dead, who would never mention to her brother this foolish misnaming of his son because the whole thing would have delighted her. (Morrison 18)

Naming is important in the African-American community. It helps to shape identity and relationships. As Gary Wilentz suggests in “Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*,” names can have other uses: “It is evident that naming can be a method of regaining control of one’s life. Moreover, this process demonstrates the pattern of passing on unique cultural traits of Africa within



the context of the African American community” (68). Misnaming, then signifies the presence of trauma.

The absence of familial and ancestral connections is a result of the trauma of slavery. This initial trauma has generational consequences. All the Dead men experience the trauma of loss and abandonment. Jake grows up never knowing his father (Solomon) and is renamed Macon Dead by a drunken clerk. His inability to read contributes to his traumatic experiences: “Despite his freedom, hard work, physical stamina, and profitable farm, Macon Dead Sr. fails to escape the cycle of racial abuse founded in slavery. Because of his inability to read, Macon unknowingly signs his land over to a devious white family” (Schreiber 98). His traumatic experiences damage his agency and ability to render a narrative reflective of self. Because he cannot read, he cannot correct the white clerk who misnames him. He does not possess the ability to identify or name himself. The trauma of racism and the history of slavery prove once again just how unimportant the names of African Americans were. As a result of this misnaming, Macon Sr. his sense of his own past and identity is diminished. When he names his daughter, Pilate, he arbitrarily picks the first name he points to in the Bible. After his wife, Sing, explains to him the significance of the name, it seems to have no effect on his decision. He continues the cycle of misnaming and proclaims, “That’s where my finger went down at” (Morrison 19). Events seem to randomly happen to him because he has no agency: “Everything bad that ever happened to him happened because he couldn’t read” (53). Being able to read is important because it offers a way to connect with the world and the self. It is central to agency to be able to reflect on words and what they mean so that identity can have meaning. Part of the reason it is possible for Macon Sr. to

be tricked out of his land is because he unable to read what the white people were asking him to sign. As a result, the land that was rightly Pilate's and Macon Jr's inheritance is replaced with the inherited trauma of watching their father murdered and, consequently, the land becomes the place where generational trauma is passed on.

Witnessing their father's death also traumatizes Macon Jr. and Pilate, although in different ways. Macon Dead Jr. deals with the traumatic results of his father's murder by internalizing white values of materialism and wealth, thus jettisoning all human emotions. He embraces the concept of ownership as an act of rebellion and survival. He is driven by external stimuli rather than internal conviction. When Macon Jr. explains to Milkman what he needs in order to survive in this world, Macon Jr. makes no mention of love or any emotional wellbeing that his son should seek: "Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). Because of the trauma Macon Jr. suffers, his agency is limited to things he can control, including money, his wife, and children. To Macon Jr., owning things and people means rejecting the closeness most familial relationships demand. Macon Jr. acts out of his trauma with aggression and hate. His home is a place of trauma and confinement where there is no love:

Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash...The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days. (10)

Macon Jr. tragically bestows upon his own family the trauma of emotional abandonment which he inherited from his father's murder. Ultimately, he is detached and stunted in his development and cannot move beyond the trauma of his past.

Macon's inability to negotiate trauma constricts his world. He obsessively avoids his father's gullibility; however, he becomes a cold mirror-image of him. At times Macon is depicted as vulnerable, but it is only when he relives events that transpire before the traumatic murder of his father: "His voice sounded different to Milkman. Less hard, and his speech was different. More southern and comfortable and soft" (52). Macon is clearly caught in the dialectic of trauma as he vacillates between being in the moment and reliving the past. When Macon Dead Jr. is talking to his son, he begins to reflect on his experience with his own father:

He [Macon Dead Jr.] was momentarily confused. His son's question had shifted the scenery. He was seeing himself at twelve, standing in Milkman's shoes and feeling what he himself had felt for his own father. The numbness that had settled on him when he saw the man he loved and admired fall off the fence; something wild ran through him when he watched the body twitching in the dirt... Was that what this boy felt for him? Maybe it was time to tell things. (50-51)

Macon is clearly caught between the past of witnessing his father's murder and his present feelings about his son. He is reliving his own past experience in the present, layering one experience on top of another, causing time to disappear and confusion to set in. The traumatic past seems to invade his consciousness on its own: "Funny how things get away from you. For years you can't remember nothing. Then just like that it all

comes back to you” (52). When he watches Pilate through her window singing, he is again brought back to a time when he loved his sister: “As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down” (30). Macon is forever changed by the trauma he experiences and oscillates between his own feelings and his failed attempts to connect with others, particularly his sister Pilate and the numbness he has for the pain of losing his father. In withholding this story of his father from his son, his agency is limited because he cannot confront his past unless he is willing to verbalize and accept it. The story of his father’s death is too terrible to relate. Consequently, it is a secret—physically as well as mentally. Ultimately, Macon never reconciles his feelings for his father and seeing his father murdered.

On the other hand, his sister Pilate deals with the traumatic death of their father differently. The trauma of her father’s death is part of Pilate’s human experience and as Schreiber points out, definitely effects both children: “As witnesses to this [father’s death] traumatic event, Macon Dead Jr. and Pilate will harbor this burden forever. Their father’s death leaves Macon and Pilate ‘homeless.’” Bewildered and grieving, they went to the house of the closest colored person they knew” (98). Instead of shutting off and shutting down emotionally, Pilate chooses to reach out to others. Losing her father and rejected by her brother, she acquires agency by embracing her past. She takes her name—the only word her father ever wrote down—and makes an earring out of it, symbolizing her reclamation of her past. She establishes a connection with her father, and is able to hear her father in her ear. She tells Ruth: “He’s helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know...It’s a good feeling to know he’s around. I tell you he’s a person I can always rely on” (141). The ear infection she causes herself by attaching the

earring to her ear can be interpreted as a symbol of the pain she feels in losing her father: “Pilate rubbed her ear until it was numb, burned the end of the wire, and punched it through her earlobe. Macon fastened the wire ends into a knot, but the lobe was swollen and running pus. At Circe’s instruction she put cobwebs on it to draw the pus out and stop the bleeding” (167). Pilate is able to move beyond the pain of losing her father and reconnect with him in a meaningful way.

Pilate’s birth further illustrates her agency, suggesting she is self-made: “After their mother died, she had come struggling out of the womb without the help of muscles or the pressure of swift womb water. As a result, for all the years he knew her, her stomach was as smooth and as sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel” (27-28). The absence of a navel makes her unique. It announces her supernatural genesis; it renders her unlimited in terms of human capacity. Unfortunately for Pilate, it also isolates her from community because without a navel she is deemed abnormal. Samuel Adams’s “Review of Song of Solomon” describes Pilate this way: “Pilate is an arresting figure who emerges as the focus of moral concern, a guardian for those lacking strength, whose major significance becomes progressively evident” (68).

Pilate ultimately suffers as an outcast essentially having no parents and being visibly marked with trauma, which forces her to connect to her past and construct her own identity. Schreiber posits, “Bereft of parents and her brother, rejected by each community she settles into, Pilate can rely on no one but herself” (100). Even after her father’s death, she continues to connect to her father, to talk to her father who guides her and has an impact on her identity: “We both seen him. I see him still. He’s helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know” (141). Pilate’s connection with her

ancestral past helps to ground her. Her rejection of the modern-world values that her brother seems to be consumed by is evident in the sparsely decorated, yet efficient home she inhabits. It is in sharp contrast to the house of death her brother has established. Her home is one of love and nurturing—the only safe place Ruth or Milkman has ever known: “She gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships” (150). Pilate is able to move beyond her traumatic past because she is able to process and construct her own story. Her story is a story that empowers rather than limits her possibilities. She becomes the author of her own narrative. This is made clear in the way that her father comes to her after she has acquired agency: “He no longer came to Pilate dressed as he had been on the wood’s edge and in the cave...Now he came in a white shirt, blue collar, and a brown peaked cap. He wore no shoes...” (150). Pilate relates to her father, not through his traumatic death but rather through what he looked like when he was alive. This is an example of what Morrison describes as rememory. Pilate reconstructs the narrative of herself and the death of her father to be a narrative that can be used to strengthen and empower her.

Nonetheless, although Pilate creates the world she longs for and establishes a sense of agency therein and is able to move beyond her traumatic past, the trauma she suffers in the loss of a man (her father) in her life is passed on, most notably, to her granddaughter, Hagar, in the form of craving and longing for men. Hagar’s obsession mirrors Pilate’s craving for love from her father and brother. Reba, Pilate’s daughter, has had some form of male presence in her life in the men that she sleeps with. Hagar has had no significant male relationships. Evidence of this emptiness in Hager is first revealed when the women are making wine and Hagar declares, “Some of my days were

hungry ones” (48), and Pilate responds, “Reba, she don’t mean food” (49). Although it is not specifically explained what Hagar is hungry for, readers understand that it is something that neither her mother nor grandmother can provide. Hagar is traumatized when the only man she has loved, her cousin and lover, Milkman, rejects her and ends their relationship. Her world is shattered, her speech becomes fragmented and she is paralyzed by her oscillating emotions of love and hate for Milkman: “Hagar raised the knife again, this time with both hands, but found she could not get her arms down... The paralyzed woman and the frozen man” (130). Hagar acts out of her trauma with aggression vowing to kill Milkman. Overwhelmed by the sense of emptiness and lovelessness that Milkman’s absence creates, Hagar feels isolated and unloved. Without the ancestral and familial grounding Pilate knows Hager needs, Hagar falls victim to outside superficial aesthetics of beauty that hasten her failed attempt at agency:

Neither Pilate nor Reba knew that Hagar was not like them. Not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba to make up her life as they had. She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it. (311)

Without a community where Hagar’s beauty and self-worth is reinforced, Hagar reads Milkman’s rejection of her as an inherent deficiency, for which she tries to compensate by conforming to white, definitions of beauty. Her mother’s and grandmother’s support is insufficient alone. Milkman’s rejection causes Hagar to question her beauty and to conform to white standards as she desperately attempts to fix whatever Milkman has

broken within her. At one point she thinks her hair is ugly. As she endures a makeover and tries on various garments, the saleswoman suggests that Hagar does not meet the traditional standard of beauty: “Oh my, she said, and reached for the tag hanging from the skirt’s waist. ‘This is a five. Don’t force it. You need, oh, a nine or eleven, I should think. Please. Don’t force it’” (315). This scene becomes prophetic because it exemplifies the African-American woman’s desire to fit into a mold that was not made for her. Hagar seems unable to construct a self that will excite Milkman’s sensibilities, and thus render her beautiful. She never considers herself as the judge of her own self-worth. Guitar attempts to console her, but she cannot seem to understand that the love and standards that matter come from within. Guitar tries to explain it to her: “You’re turning over your whole life to him. Your whole life, girl. And if it means so little to you that you can give it away, hand it to him, then why should it mean any more to him? He can’t value you more than you value yourself” (310). Hagar cannot traverse the pain of rejection, and when she attempts to verbalize it and to conceptualize Milkman’s reasoning, Pilate muffles her voice, unknowingly stifling the birth of Hagar’s agency. These traumatic experiences metastasize within, rendering her unable to conceive self-hood and thus to construct an authentic narrative of self. Hagar’s identity remains embryonic, leaving her love for self unbirthed.

Just as Hagar’s identity fails to bloom, so does Milkman’s. Generational and communal trauma contextualize Milkman Dead’s malformed identity. In Patrick Bryce Bjork’s *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place within the Community*, Bjork describes Milkman at the onset of the novel: “Milkman seeks freedom from all those whom he believes have treated him ‘like a garbage pail’ ... But While



Milkman wishes to deny the obvious, those characters surrounding him reveal to him and the reader just how detached and distorted Milkman has become” (99). As he reluctantly hears the traumatic recollections of his mother, father, and aunt, he becomes more interested in finding out who he is. Based on the story Pilate tells him, he goes south to retrieve what he believes to be gold. However, what he finds is a link to his ancestral past. The traumatic suicide of the insurance agent, Robert Smith, precipitates Milkman’s birth, which signals the inherited racial trauma Milkman must navigate. Initially, Milkman has no interest in his past and demonstrates no concern for a familial history: “His life was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn’t concern himself an awful lot about other people. There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for” (107). He is practically severed from his ancestral past and sees no value in himself. He does everything he can to avoid the traumatic legacy of his parents and to circumvent their horrific history:

He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents’ past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well. He hated the acridness in his mother’s and father’s relationship, the conviction of righteousness they each held on to with both hands. And his effort to ignore it, transcend it, seemed to work only when he spent his days looking for whatever was light-hearted and without grave consequence. He avoided commitment and strong feelings, and shied away from decisions. He wanted to know as little as possible, to feel only enough to get through the day amiably and to be interesting enough to

warrant the curiosity of other people—but not their all-consuming devotion. (180-181)

Milkman recognizes the debilitating effect of trauma on his parents. They are doomed to living in and repeating the past, and he is sure that he wants to avoid this type of existence. As an act of survival, he leaves home. Ironically, that he avoids commitment and is disconnected from community almost guarantees his repetition of their traumatic experiences. Milkman senses something is missing; he is incomplete. Early in Milkman's life, he is marked with a sense of profound loss. From the time he was four, he is marked physically with trauma: "By the time Milkman was fourteen he had noticed that one of his legs was shorter than the other...and he never told anybody about it—ever...It bothered him and he acquired movements and habits to disguise what to him was a burning defect" (62). His physical defect is emblematic of the tainted nature of his inheritance that neither he nor his people are willing to acknowledge. The culmination of these traumas leaves Milkman with detached and devoid of intimate personal relationships.

When Milkman journeys to Shalimar in search of material wealth, he ends up finding his ancestral legacy, which allows him to put the pieces of his otherwise traumatic experience in context. He is witness to a communal memory of Emmitt Till's death: "The men began to trade tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they had witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves. A litany of humiliation and personal outrage" (82). The men's testimonies, horrors often too terrible to relate, demonstrate their ability to negotiate trauma. Subsequently, Milkman is able to connect to the past through their experience.

When Milkman is invited on a hunting trip, he begins a rite of passage. He is stripped of his suit and given military fatigues by the hunters. During the hunt he falls behind his hunting partner and is isolated from the rest of the hunters. In his isolation he reflects on his treatment of the people who love him and his own identity. The hunt is significant because it allows him to connect with his past by surrendering all of the artificial class distinctions that he has held onto, thus finding it easy to connect with the people in Shalimar: “He did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody. He’d always considered himself the outsider in his family” (296).

Having been connected to his past, he is able to understand his mother’s trauma of being abandoned and to empathize with her: “And suppose he [Milkman] were married and his wife refused him for fifteen years. His mother had been able to live through that by a long nursing of her son, some occasional visit to a graveyard. What might she have been like had her husband loved her?” (303-304). This also allows Milkman to re-read his father’s obsession with material goods:

[Macon Dead Jr.] paid homage to his own father’s life and death by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. He loved these things to excess. Owning, building, acquiring—that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father’s death. (304)

Milkman understands that his father’s materiality is actually an homage to his father’s memory. Milkman sees his father’s humanity and is able to connect with his father’s

experience. Milkman supplants a meaningless life with one bolstered by meaning and historical significance. Along the way, he acquires the ability to reassemble pieces of a shared history and even to participate in it. This is demonstrated toward the end of the novel when, after observing children at play, he says, singing his own folkloric history, “But I can play it now. It’s my game now” (331). Milkman accepts his ancestral past and achieves agency. He recognizes the past as a tool to shape his future and the ways in which his ignorance of it limited his sight.

In order to move beyond trauma, one must confront the past and accept it and a narrative that will be conducive to shaping a positive future, rather than be constricted and defined by it. Milkman must establish meaningful relationships with in the context of a community, as Trudier Harris points out in *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*: “The journey cannot work for Milkman unless some reversal occurs; flight itself must be made secondary to commitment. If he merely celebrates flight, then he runs the risk of separation and of continuing to follow in his great-grandfather’s flight pattern” (202). He understands that Solomon’s flight leaves those who Solomon abandoned traumatized.

All of the characteristics of trauma seem to manifest in the characters affecting not only their lives but the lives around them. Dynamic trauma is a cancer of sorts, infecting both one’s own development and relationships. Ruth, Hagar, Guitar, and Macon Jr. all demonstrate the effects of dynamic trauma. Their lives show that, left unchecked, trauma grows until it deteriorates one’s consciousness and impairs one’s health—emotionally and psychologically. Perhaps, Guitar says it best:

Listen, baby people do funny things. Specially us. The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can't help. Things that make us hurt one another. We don't even know why. But look here, don't carry it inside and don't give it to nobody else. Try to understand it, but if you can't, just forget it and keep yourself strong man. (88)

Guitar's sentiment expresses a diagnosis and dangerous prescription for the healing of traumatic experience. Guitar acknowledges the strange things people will do to survive. He also recognizes that some of the survival mechanisms people have used in the past in order to survive traumatic experiences should not be passed on to others and should be guarded against.

Milkman illustrates that perhaps one way to manage the effects of dynamic trauma is to confront the past and utilize memory as an exercise in individual agency. At the beginning of the novel, Milkman is spiritually and culturally lost. He is cut off from his past and has no purpose. As he comes to understand who he is and where he comes from, he becomes empowered. The novel's ambiguous ending still suggests Milkman forges a new identity. Morrison seems to be making the point that before one can move ahead and begin to construct identity, one must discover one's past. Whether Milkman is killed or flies away is not as important as knowing where he has come from.

As exhibited in *Sula*, traumatic experience is also witnessed in *Song of Solomon*. The presence of the dialectic of trauma also gives credence to the novel as a trauma narrative. In both *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* individual lives are narrated to readers in a non-linear fashion. There are flashbacks and other moments when the reader is propelled

forward and then jolted back to the present moment of a character's life. This non-linear narrative style forces the reader to experience a form of narrative trauma by which the reader must not only put the pieces together but also order them and discern meaning from the text. This makes for a much more complex and authentic rendering of traumatic experience. Very much like the character of Milkman, the reader hears stories from different characters' perspectives, in no particular order and must arrive at meaning and a conclusion based on his or her reading. For example, by the end of the story readers must determine whether Milkman takes flight, is murdered by Guitar or both. Similar to *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* depicts characters who fall victim to trauma because they fail to witness their own experiences. Interesting to note that many characters do not verbalize their experiences. Macon Jr. never expresses his profound sense of loss concerning his father's murder, and as a result, the traumatic effects paralyze his interpersonal relationships. Guitar never tells the story of his father's violent death to anyone either. Ultimately, these characters' inability to testify and relate their stories perpetuate their traumatic experience and allow for it to metastasize within the individual.

## CHAPTER V

### *BELOVED*: TRAUMATIC BEGINNINGS

Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning fifth novel, *Beloved*, is arguably the most poignant expression of dynamic trauma examined in this study. This work, even more than others, explores how trauma damages agency, resulting in disconnection and paralysis in the individual. In the foreword of *Beloved*, Morrison explains how the idea for the novel was sparked by a newspaper clipping in *The Black Book*, a book she had previously edited. The clipping tells the story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave mother who "was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than they be returned to the owner's plantation" (XVII). *Beloved* is Morrison's recreation of the interior lives of the Margaret Garners of the world and the many women who survived and died during slavery. In the article "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Rediscovering History," Nidhi Khatana puts it this way:

The powerful corporeal ghost who creates matrilineal connection between Africa and America, *Beloved* stands for every African woman whose story will never be told. She is the haunting symbol of the many *Beloveds*—generations of mothers and daughters—haunted down and stolen from Africa; as such, she is unlike mortals, invulnerable to barriers of time, space and place. (106)

Written 11 years after *Song of Solomon* in 1988, *Beloved* is about the enslaved protagonist Sethe who escapes to the Sweet Home Plantation owned by the unusually nice Mr. Garner and his wife. Sethe marries Halle of her own choosing and bears three children. After Mr. Garner dies, the plantation is turned over to the abusive Schoolteacher. Under his strict and harsh control, many of the slave men plot their escape, including Paul D, Halle, Paul A, and Six O. Unbeknownst to Schoolteacher, Sethe secretly sends her sons to live with their grandmother. When Schoolteacher finds out what Sethe has done, he is angered and allows his two nephews to sexually assault Sethe in the barn, while Sethe's husband and Paul D secretly watch in horror. When Sethe reports the assault to Mrs. Garner, the nephews retaliate by whipping Sethe near death. The whipping of her back results in scarring which resembles an oak tree. Sethe finally decides to make her own escape, and as she is traversing through the forest, she encounters Amy Denver, who helps Sethe give birth to her last child, Denver, for whom she is named.

Sethe crosses the Ohio River with the help of ferryman Stamp Paid. She is reunited with her family for nearly a month before the slave catchers find her. Before they can grab her, she gathers her children and frantically runs to the barn where she slits her baby girl's throat and threatens to kill her two boys to save them from the horrors of slavery. Sethe goes to jail and is condemned to death. She uses sex as payment for the simple inscription "Beloved" on her daughter's gravestone. Later, Sethe's death sentence is commuted, and she is released from jail, but she is no longer welcome in the African-American community. The tale of what she has done to her child has spread across the community, making her an outcast.



After Baby Suggs' death, Sethe's two boys leave in the middle of the night because they are afraid of Beloved's ghost, leaving Sethe and Denver all alone in the house with Beloved. By the time Paul D arrives, he has already been through his own traumatic experiences in the Georgia prison system. He reunites with Sethe and drives Beloved's ghost out of the house. Mysteriously, a woman about the same age that Beloved would have been had she lived physically appears at 124 Bluestone Road. This physical manifestation of Beloved is childlike at first but very quickly grows into a terror for Sethe, Paul D, and Denver. The narrative ends with Beloved vanishing after women in the African-American community come to pray for Sethe. Through Sethe and other characters in the novel, Morrison renders a historical narrative of slavery, placing those who have been historically marginalized at the center of the story. African-American men and women are once again the subjects of her text. Once again, racism as trauma is illustrated through the vehicle of slavery as it shapes and shatters the mechanisms that form identity.

Just as in the previous novels examined in this study, characteristics of trauma are also apparent in lives of the characters and in the structure of *Beloved*. The characteristics of trauma exhibited in *Beloved* include psychologically overwhelming events, fragmentation, intermingling the past and the present (the dialectic of trauma), and repetition. These characteristics of trauma are witnessed in individuals, generations, and communities. Furthermore, in *Beloved*, readers are witness to unaddressed trauma which consequently leads to dynamic trauma in the individual and the community. The dynamic trauma evidenced in *Beloved* renders individuals psychologically as well as

physiologically paralyzed and unable to construct a balanced narrative reflective of a healthy self.

*Beloved* is a trauma narrative as it contains many traumatic characteristics. One of the many traumatic characteristics presented in *Beloved* is the unspeakable nature of overwhelming events. Too often silence is the result of overwhelming events. Michelle Balaev's article "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" suggests that Morrison borrows this trope: "The rhetorical use of silence in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* underscores the dehumanizing and torturous effects of slavery on the human body and psyche, yet emphasizes the inner strength and resiliency of African and African-American slaves in North America which is a perspective articulated in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (162). Like the protagonist in Linda Brent's slave narrative, Morrison's characters in *Beloved* attempt to verbalize their stories for the first time. When Sethe witnesses her mother's execution, she begins to stutter, signaling that the experience is not easily represented with words and is too terrible to speak. Later, she confesses to her daughter that she has not told the story of her mother's death to anyone. Sethe is faced with a plethora of unspeakable, overwhelming occurrences, including witnessing the lynching of her mother, being a victim of rape, being abandoned by her husband, and killing her own child. Her identity becomes consumed with the pain of dynamic trauma. The individual trauma that she experiences metastasizes and renders her paralyzed and stunted in development.

Sethe's experience of individual trauma best illustrates the damaging effects of dynamic trauma. Throughout the novel, Sethe shows symptoms of the dialectic of trauma and is virtually consumed by her experiences too terrible to relate. Her

experiences as a slave girl inflict the initial mental and physical wounds that regenerate and resurface throughout her life. Sethe relives the hanging of her mother, and the experience conjures feelings that she has never fully verbalized. As a slave child, Sethe had very little connection with her mother. She only saw her in the field and rarely did they sleep in the same room. Nan and Sethe's mother provided Sethe with as much protection as two slave women could. There was a moment when her mother attempted to connect with her by showing Sethe her mark so that Sethe was able to identify her mother in the event something horrible happened to her body, but this moment gave very little solace to Sethe as Sethe has no mark: "'Yes, Ma'am,' I[Sethe] said. 'But how will you know me[Sethe]? How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.' Sethe chuckled" (*Beloved* 73). Sethe's desire to be "marked" was an attempt to be connected to her mother. The mark, for Sethe, was a way for her to be assigned meaning and a way to help shape her identity. Without the mark, Sethe struggles a lifetime to find ways to construct a sense of herself.

Albeit difficult, Sethe constructs a sense of self which manages to keep her traumatic past and circumstance of enslavement at bay for some time. When she is sold to the Sweet Home plantation, she recognizes that the Garners treat their slaves markedly different from the way they do in Carolina. Because the Garners do not physically abuse their slaves and seemingly treat their slaves with a level of respect, Sethe can construct an identity with familial connections she makes at Sweet Home. She sees the characters of Baby Suggs and Mrs. Garner as mother figures and is united in holy matrimony as Halle's wife. She ultimately creates and connects to life in the form of her four children. The Sweet Home community Sethe is now a part of helps to shape her identity.

Unfortunately, the community is destroyed later: “Sethe had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that ‘somebody’ son who had fathered every one of her children. A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted, lean on, as though Sweet Home really was one...A bigger fool never lived” (29). Sethe builds a sense of identity on the illusion that in the Sweet Home community, she has some authority over her own life. The narrator calls her a fool for thinking she has authority over her own life in a world where she is a slave, and the primary aim is to strip the enslaved of authority over one’s self. What her husband Halle understands when he buys his mother Baby Suggs, and what Sethe must now discover is that slavery—be it with a benevolent or mean master—is still slavery. The destructive forces of slavery are ever present, even if they are not sensed.

Another characteristic of the trauma narrative observed in *Beloved* is the element of fragmentation. In the article “Toni Morrison and Re-imagining History,” John Ambrosia comments on Morrison’s narrative style: “Morrison is able to dislodge and destabilize dominant meanings. That is, by placing signifiers in different interpretive contexts, shifting recursively through time and space, and by signifying intertextuality, she opens their semantic possibilities and makes it possible for readers to hear new meanings” (111). Clearly, Morrison uses fragmentation as a literary device to illustrate trauma. Just as in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, readers of *Beloved* receive bits and pieces of the experience of slavery from different perspectives that ultimately must be assembled for characters as well as readers to achieve meaning. Also, Morrison uses a fragmented timeline; the narrative does not unfold in a linear fashion. In “Temporal Defamiliarization in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” Brian Finney articulates that “part of her

[Morrison's] narrative strategy, then is to position the reader within the text in such a way as to invite participation in the (re)construction of the story, one which is usually complicated by an achronological ordering of events" (21). For example, *Beloved's* violent death is told from multiple perspectives and in a non-linear fashion. *Beloved* is a manifestation of the personal trauma Sethe experiences, but she is also representative of the communal trauma experienced by the "many thousand gone" as a result of the Middle Passage. This is evident in *Beloved's* fragmented account of what occurs on a slaveship:

All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes I am not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it if we had more to drink we could make tears we cannot make sweat or morning water so the men without skin bring us theirs in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men. (p.210)

This illustrates the scattered, fragmented, and chaotic pattern of trauma that Morrison would like readers to experience. *Beloved's* language is fragmented and, at times

confusing, without punctuation. Morrison employs this fragmented style to emphasize the traumatic experience not only for *Beloved* but also for readers.

When the Garners pass away and Schoolteacher takes over at Sweet Home, Sethe's reality and identity are shattered once again. Everything that Sethe has known as meaningful is made meaningless. Her marriage to Halle is destroyed as Halle abandons her and the children, rendering her vulnerable to the harsh realities of being a slave woman. Sethe is raped, her breast milk taken by Schoolteacher's nephews, and she is beaten. Sethe's physical body is proven not to be her own. She escapes to 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio, reconnecting with her children whom she sent ahead of her to Baby Suggs. When Schoolteacher finds her in Ohio, Sethe commits infanticide and is jailed. Consequently, she is isolated from the community for the assumed crime of killing her child.

Sethe's sense of self is violently fragmented and disordered because of the trauma she experiences, and she never seems to recover. Sethe is essentially a character in pieces. Her identity as a human being, a woman, a mother, and a wife is shattered and unhinged from its traditional definition: "...her [Sethe's] safe and happy life will shatter after *Beloved's* murder...Sethe's killing of her daughter ruptures her ties with her community, which abandons her. Severed from any ideal self, she experiences isolation and vulnerability" (Schreiber 42). Thus, she has little agency in the world and barely exists in her present time.

Another characteristic of trauma exhibited in *Beloved* is intermingling the past with the present. This particular dialectic of trauma emphasizes disordered experiences. In *Beloved*, time is not fixed; it is relative to one's existence. Many of the characters'

pasts continuously reemerge to rob them of any future that they might have. In many cases, past experiences are presented as more real than present moments and are disruptions in characters' lives. The past does not stay in the past. These disruptions are evident in Sethe's life; the past continuously intrudes upon her present signaling disorder and causing psychological paralysis. In "Beloved: Space, Architecture, Trauma," Andrew Hock Soon NG makes this assessment: "Her [Sethe's] refusal to face her past renders that traumatic moment a non-event, and by extension, Sethe's eventual nonexistence as well. That she is trapped in trauma and cannot escape is due, ironically, to her repudiation of that trauma by avoiding any discussion of it" (237). Sethe would like to forget her painful past, but it repetitiously emerges and becomes cyclical in nature, forcing her to relive the horrific past in the present. In a very real sense, the ghost of Beloved is Sethe's past which attempts to rob her of her present and future.

As a sign of individual trauma, the past continues to disrupt the present. Eighteen years later, although Sethe survives Sweet Home and escapes slavery, she still struggles with her traumatic past. When Paul D arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, she knows that it is Paul D, but asks, "Is that you?" (7). For Sethe, Paul D is a reminder of the past that she would rather soon forget. She does not want to recognize what she already knows—the horrific life of a slave woman and the unspeakable atrocities she is subjected to. This unwillingness to confront her past prevents her from moving forward in life: "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. The 'better life' she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one" (51). For Sethe, the future means forgetting the past. The future does not exist. When Denver wants to put off getting her hair combed, Sethe responds, "Today is always here... Tomorrow never" (72). She

attempts to disassociate herself from her past; subsequently, the past continues to consume her and revisit her in the form of flashbacks and later her own daughter: “But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (83). As a mother, Sethe is overprotective of Denver to the point of suffocation. This stems from being abandoned by her mother and the need to have ownership of things or people. She sees Denver as hers: “Excuse me, but I [Sethe] can’t hear a word against her [Denver]. I’ll chastise her. You leave her alone” (54). Sethe tries to protect Denver from the world that Sethe was not protected from. Her past traumatically colors her daughter’s present and future: “As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered” (51). For Sethe, the world is a dangerous place—one to be feared and avoided. By merely trying to survive in the world, she is not living in the world.

With the corporeal emergence of Beloved, Sethe comes face to face with her traumatic past. The past becomes her present. At first, Sethe believes her daughter has come home to her and that she will be able to unload the pain, the guilt, and the shame that she has harbored all these years: “No matter how much I wanted to. I couldn’t lay down nowhere in peace, back then. Now I can. I can sleep like the drowned, have mercy. She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine” (241). Eventually, Sethe is all but consumed by Beloved (her past): “Finding in Beloved what she thought she had lost forever, Sethe is wrapped in the timeless present, desireless with no plans at all for the future” (George 119). She loses her job and spends all her money trying to compensate Beloved with things once could not provide. She abandons Denver and gives Beloved all of her attention. Sethe hopes that Beloved will understand why she



committed the unspeakable act of killing her. Instead, Beloved torments Sethe with her own guilt: “Beloved accused her of leaving her behind...how could she have left her...Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life” (Beloved 284). Sethe wrestles with her past; she struggles to put the pieces of her life in the right order. But because she is isolated from the community and left alone with her own thoughts and the thoughts of her past which include Beloved, Sethe is overwhelmed by despondency, and is near defeat: “Listless and sleepy with hunger Denver saw the flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb fade. Saw Sethe’s eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved—her lineless palms, her forehead, the smile under her jaw, crooked and much too long—everything except her basket-fat stomach” (285). Sethe’s past, in its physical manifestation of Beloved, gets stronger. Draining the life from Sethe, it grows. Beloved is literally feeding on Sethe, consuming her.

Repetition is also a characteristic of trauma identified in *Beloved*. Characters may disremember or repress an overwhelming circumstance or event that has occurred, only to have these events or circumstances recur and repeat as unwanted memories, flashbacks, and language. Often characters are unable or unwilling to move beyond these recurrences as their memories continually disrupt their lives making reality and their memories of past occurrences often indistinguishable. Sethe exhibits the traumatic symptom of repeating past experiences. As Sheldon George states in his article “Approaching the Thing of Slavery: A Lacanian Analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” repetition is a significant symptom of trauma that disrupts time:

What is most compelling about *Beloved* is its articulation of a psychoanalytic conception of the role that repetition plays in the lives of its African American characters...What Morrison's *Beloved* points to is precisely the persistence of a traumatic past that haunts the present through a subjective, psychic experience of trauma that defies the limits of time and space. (115)

One of the first stories Sethe tells Paul D is how they took her milk. She repeats the line three times: "They took my milk" (*Beloved* 20). Sethe suffers the effects of bodily trauma and is paralyzed in her thoughts. She continues to keep her hands busy as she prepares the evening meal. Sethe is paralyzed by her memory of sexual assault. She is unable to express what has occurred. This signals Sethe's inability to process and relate the complete experience that has transpired. The act of having to keep her hands busy illustrates that the traumatic experience has also been imprinted on her body as well. This is also witnessed when Sethe has a delayed response to her mother's death, which surfaces only when she tells what little she knows about her mother to Beloved: "As a grown-up woman Sethe was angry, but not certain at what. A mighty wish for Baby Suggs broke over her like a surf...Sethe looked at the two girls sitting by the stove...They seemed little and far away" (74). As she tells the story of how her mother is raped and that she is the only one her mother names, she is reminded of her own feelings of abandonment. She turns inward and away from the moment with the girls and relives her own feelings about her mother. Although she physically survives Sweet Home, Sethe cannot escape the traumatic effects of abandonment and the scars of slavery. As she tells the story of how her mother was hanged, Sethe exhibits signs of bodily trauma: "She

[Sethe] had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something private and shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross” (73). Sethe’s memory of her mother’s death invokes a physical response: “By repressing or disassociating herself from her trauma, Sethe combats the anxiety that results in her vulnerability, her lack of protection against the feeling of helplessness in the larger white community” (Schreiber 37). She becomes anxious as she remembers the details of her mother’s death and her reaction to it and must manage the inherent trauma that has been mentally and physically seared into her being.

Another character ravaged by the traumatic institution of slavery is Paul D. As a prisoner on a Georgia chain gang, Paul D is sexually assaulted and does not tell anyone. An essential part of trauma is that the event overwhelms the individual in such a way that it becomes difficult to put into words, to tell the story, partly because one must remember the experience and translate it in relatable terms. Many of Morrison’s characters, including Paul D have difficulty constructing their own narratives. This inability to tell their own stories illustrates a damaged sense of agency within the characters brought about by communal and personal trauma. As illustrated in the earlier texts examined in this study, identity is partly constructed through the ability to tell one’s story and relate it to a community that will witness and accept the individual. If the personal trauma is so deeply rooted and ineffable that the experience remains unspeakable, the difficulty in connecting with a community becomes even more of a burden for the individual, and the trauma continues to grow within the individual.

As one of the men of Sweet Home and one who has served time in a Georgia prison, Paul D is subjected to unspeakable horrors that damage how he sees himself: “Paul D’s memory, like Sethe’s, triggers trauma that he must repress in his search for a place to call home” (Schreiber 45). By the time he reaches 124 Bluestone Road, he is a shell of his former self. When Sethe first meets him in the yard and asks him if it is him, he replies, “What’s left” (7). This suggests that Paul D is aware that his sense of self has been altered. There is not much left of Paul D, given the sexual assaults and killings he witnesses; his traumatic experiences have consumed much of his being. His brothers were murdered at Sweet Home, and he had a bit placed in his mouth as if he were an animal. The bit put in Paul D’s mouth symbolizes his dehumanization and the dehumanization of those in bondage. This also emphasizes how trauma renders one virtually speechless. Paul D is unable to console Halle or speak to him after Halle witnesses Sethe being raped. Paul D is mute as if his being and impact on the world are non-existent. Sethe contemplates what it must have been like for Paul D:

He wants me to ask him about what it was like for him—about how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it, had seen it time after time in the place before Sweet Home...The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. (84)

To be treated less than human has a traumatic effect on Paul D. From his perspective, roosters have more freedom than he does. He has no voice and without the ability to voice or express feelings, his agency is destroyed. When he is placed in a box on his way to jail, he begins to tremble; he has no control over his hands. His body is not his own:

“...his hands quit taking instruction...They would not hold his penis to urinate or a spoon to scoop lumps of lima beans into his mouth. The miracle of their obedience came with the hammer at dawn” (126). While he has no control over his hands to do what would serve him, he acquiesces to the control of others. This bodily dissociation is one of the effects of the dialectic of trauma. This is also the first time that Paul D leaves the only place he has known. He is separated from all that is familiar to him and is thrust into the world. He learns through his experience that love and being connected to people are dangerous. He expresses this as he reflects on the relationship between Sethe and Denver:

Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave women to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little left over for the next one.

(54)

To protect himself from being vulnerable and experiencing the pain of loss, Paul D disassociates himself from his feelings. It is a defense mechanism to combat feelings of helplessness experienced in the past. It is also a survival technique. Paul D employs this desire to survive by carrying with him at all times a tobacco tin—a physical relic of bygone days. However, an astute reader knows that this artifact is filled with memories of a former life. Morrison skillfully illustrates this point by intimating that the tobacco tin is symbolic of Paul D's heart. Indeed, it contains the shameful memories of the past and all that he has gone through that an otherwise beating heart cannot:

Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut...for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him. And it would hurt her to know that there was no red heart bright as Mister's comb beating in him. (86)

For Paul D, the tobacco tin makes past hurt manageable and lessens the possibility of these past hurts and pains spilling into his life and adversely affecting him. The issue with having a tobacco tin for a heart is that it is not a living beating organ. It becomes a repository that stores information as is, without being able to sift specific memories and thus decipher between what to keep and what to discard. Paul D withholds many horrible experiences because he believes if he were to tell Sethe, it would shame him and shatter any sense of goodness she might have seen in him. It is also a willful act of repression. By not telling anyone, by not verbalizing his past experiences, he does not have to deal with the shame or guilt he feels within.

However, by keeping his experiences a secret he cannot confront his past nor move beyond it. The sexual assault Paul D experiences on the chain gang is particularly disturbing because it diminishes his agency and identity even further. He is emasculated by having to perform fellatio on the white prison guards:

Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. Paul D did not know that then. He was looking at his palsied hands, smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves', as he stood before the man kneeling in mist on his right. Convinced he was next, Paul D retched--

vomiting up nothing at all. An observing guard smashed his shoulder with the rifle and the engaged one decided to skip the new man for the time being lest his pants and shoes got soiled by nigger puke. (*Beloved* 108)

Again, Paul D's agency is shattered; there is nothing he can do to control these violations of his body. This has a dissociative effect on Paul D. He has been stripped of agency. His hands are paralyzed and unable to protect his body from sexual assault. This particular sexual trauma is humiliating for Paul D. It is an event he would much rather forget than remember. Ironically, his unwillingness to confront what has happened to him leads him to compartmentalize his experiences. Lynda Koolish's article "To Be Loved and Cry Shame: A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" offers this analysis:

The memory of what has happened to them is pushed aside, externalized, repressed, placed in a box, given over to someone else. But where psychic disintegration has taken place, each character splits into a "core self" and "alters," none of whom possess the others' memories. Within each individual, there is no memory/knowledge that a split has taken place.

(173)

Clearly, Paul D places his traumatic experiences in a tobacco tin and suffers psychic disintegration. The trauma he suffers is indicative of the trauma suffered by millions of enslaved. For the African-American community in Ohio, Paul D then becomes a symbol of slavery that they would also like to forget. Consequently Paul D is an outcast of the community.

Paul D stays on the road, running away from his past. It is not until he decides to settle down at 124 Bluestone Road with Sethe and Denver that he begins to confront his past and, subsequently, help Sethe to confront hers. Perhaps the same way Baby Suggs felt her heart beat for the first time when she made it out of Sweet Home, Paul D begins to feel his heart beat when he reunites with Sethe, asserting himself in the world: “[t]here was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D arrived and broke up the place, making room, shifting it, moving it over to someplace else, then standing in the place he had made” (39). It is Paul D who drives the ghost from 124 and helps Sethe face her past. He asserts himself as the man of the house and tries to bring Sethe, Denver, and himself together as a family. By confronting the ghost at 124 and reconnecting with Sethe, Paul D risks reliving the past to build a family: “...He had nothing else to hold on to. His tobacco tin blown open, spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey” (218). In order for Paul D to move beyond his past traumas, he must be willing to be vulnerable again and create new experiences and memories unbound by the constraints of his tobacco-tin-like heart. When Stamp Paid relates the story of Beloved’s death to Paul D, he once again suffers the damaging effects of trauma. At first, he cannot believe the newspaper drawing is Sethe. This is because the image does not resemble the person he knows. Once he accepts the truth, he is shocked and by abandoning Sethe and Denver, he isolates himself. He sleeps wherever he can and attempts to put the pieces of a fragmented life together again. Unlike Baby Suggs, who witnessed the event first-hand and is utterly irrecoverable as a result, Paul D ultimately returns and reconnects with Sethe and Denver. Paul D recalls how Sixo felt about Thirty-Mile Woman: “She is a friend of mine. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them



back to me in all the right order. It's good to know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind" (321). Paul D becomes a psychological help mate for Sethe and helps her put the shattered pieces of her life in order. He helps her see herself for who she is, and Sethe is the friend of his mind. He reminds Sethe that she is her best thing. This suggests that agency begins with self-awareness and the accepting of one's fullest truth. Sethe and Paul D help each other confront their traumatic pasts so that they can live in the present and create a future, leaving the past in its place.

The individual trauma many characters face leads to paralysis and damaged agency. Baby Suggs is one character who suffers the full extent of dynamic trauma. Almost from the beginning of Baby Suggs' story, she is isolated and fractured because of slavery. Her discussion with Mr. Garner about her name demonstrates how little agency she has:

"Why you all call me Jenny?"

"Cause that what's on your sales ticket, gal. Ain't that your name? What you call yourself?"

"Nothin, I don't call myself nothing." (167)

Baby Suggs is deprived of her identity through slavery. Baby Suggs's apparent namelessness demonstrates the destructive force of slavery on one's selfhood and the dehumanization of enslaved people. Schreiber states, "She [Baby Suggs] describes an erasure of self and a lack of connection with parents and siblings. Her core identity is shaped and defined by white slaveholders, lacks a sense of self outside of her inferior and subservient position" (33). The only connection she has to any sense of self is her husband's last name and the name he called her, "Baby." Baby Suggs is also marked

physically and mentally by slavery. As a result of working the fields, she suffers a broken hip that never heals. She suffers profound loss as all of her children are sold away from her except Halle who marries Sethe. For Baby Suggs, the realization that slave families are destroyed and broken apart carelessly leaves her horrified: “What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (*Beloved* 28). Baby Suggs calls attention to the paralysis of the community in the face of slavery. With the community’s helplessness and lack of agency slave families are torn apart, as if the traumatic event is a normal. Baby Suggs is granted agency when her son pays for her freedom and she moves North to Ohio with the Bodwin family. Almost immediately, Baby Suggs reconnects with her own body and realizes her whole self:

She didn’t know what the look looked like and was not curious. But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, ‘these hands belong to me. These *my* hands.’ Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? (166).

To recognize her own hands and heartbeat as her own signifies her ownership and connection to her body and her ability to achieve agency; she becomes subject and not object. Subsequently, Baby Suggs acts and affects the world in a meaningful way. She creates a haven for runaway slaves, the weary, and those passing through. All are welcome at 124 Bluestone Road. She becomes a spiritual leader and healer, preaching to the community to love and connect with one another and perhaps more importantly, to have love of self:

You got to love it, You! This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved...So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating of the heart, love that too. (104)

Baby Suggs survives the atrocity of slavery, having sustained the scars child loss and having a body in pieces. As an ex-slave, she achieves agency and forges an identity that heals and guides others.

Unfortunately, Baby Suggs's wholeness shatters into pieces when slavecatchers arrive and consequently Sethe commits infanticide. The unspeakable act results in Baby Suggs closing her mouth, never speaking at the Clearing again and retreating inward. When Stamp Paid pleads with her to say "The Word" She replies, "That's one other thing took away from me" (210). Baby Suggs goes on to repeat continuously, "I'm saying they came in my yard" (211). Her space has been violated once again, shattering not only her family but also her sense of identity. She can no longer give the word because she has nothing to say that can address what Sethe has done. Her sense of right and wrong is unclear, and as one who has grappled with profound loss, Sethe's act is ineffable. She insists that she wants to concentrate on something that is not dangerous or harmful. She isolates herself from the community and retreats to her bedroom where she fixates on colors all day. The space she creates to construct positive reflections of self has become soiled and made dirty with the intrusion of slavery, where a mother must make a choice no mother under normal circumstances should have to make. Baby Suggs

is unable to recover her narrative voice and ultimately becomes a living testament to the damaging effects of dynamic trauma:

...Far worse—was what Baby Suggs died of...That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she [Sethe] and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. (295-296)

To be unable to remember the self and unable to represent the self in one's own words and images point to the damaging experience of dynamic trauma. The psychological event is so unnerving that one cannot integrate it into one's own narrative of self nor can one relate it. Baby Suggs implodes emotionally, unable to put her shattered self together again to tell the story of what happened to her granddaughter.

Generational trauma is also evident in the characters of *Beloved* with slavery providing the context. Sethe's mother, a slave, is unable to provide her daughter with a safe place or community wherein to construct an identity outside of an externally imposed one. Sethe and her mother are deprived of the mother/daughter bond. Sethe seldom sees her mother. Nan, the only tie Sethe has to her mother, explains to Sethe that Nan and her mother came over on a slave ship and that Sethe was the only one she kept: "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them" (74). This dialogue suggests that her mother commits infanticide. Sethe is the only child who she keeps and names because she was made from love. Her mother, having been taken

away to the slave ship and raped numerous, throws away and destroys the products of her rape.

Sethe inherits her own physical and psychological scars which will invariably be transmitted to her daughters. By committing the act of infanticide, Sethe joins her mother, Sula and Eva Peace as women willing to commit violence as a means of protecting children. Sethe's mother attempts to give Sethe a sense of identity she is by showing her the mark of the circle and cross branded beneath her breast. This mark illustrates how the identity of Sethe's mother is inextricably bound to slavery. It is who she is. She tells Sethe that if anything should happen to her, she will be able to know her by the mark. Sethe asks her mother to give her the same mark. Sethe chuckles because she realizes later that what she was asking for was to be marked with the scar of slavery, to be defined by it, and to have that mark transferred to her by her mother no less, for which, her mother slaps her.

Sethe, very much like her mother, inherits the mark of slavery when she is beaten unmercifully, leaving a scar resembling a tree on her back. The physical scar indicates the physical trauma of slavery: "Tiny little chokecherry leaves. But that was eighteen years ago. Could have cherries too for all I know...Schoolteacher made one open my back and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still" (18, 20). The tree and the fruit it bears illustrate the inherent relationship between a mother and child. The fruit symbolizes Sethe's daughters. Sethe is whipped for telling on the white boys who take her milk. She attempts to give her children what she did not have, a motherly connection. She explains that no one can nurse her children like she can. She wants to ensure that her children do not feel abandoned and alone in the world: "The milk would be there and I

would be there with it” (19). Because of her own abandonment, Sethe is overprotective of her daughter Denver: “I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms” (18). Denver is subsequently isolated and has very little connection with the outside world: “I can’t live here. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I can’t live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by” (17). In Sethe’s attempt to protect Denver from the evils of slavery, she consequently suffocates and limits Denver’s freedom.

Sethe unassumingly commits the inherited act of infanticide just as her mother before her, but for different reasons. While Sethe’s mother kills her children out of shame and disgust, Sethe kills out of love, to protect her children from the atrocities of slavery. Both acts of infanticide illustrate generational trauma: “Others in her [Sethe] position also committed infanticide, and Sethe therefore repeats a generational acting out of violence as a means of protecting children” (Schreiber 50). Further, Denver is also a victim of generational trauma as she is shaped by the history of her mother’s trauma. As Schreiber points out: “The trauma of the white world has molded Denver’s young life in a different way. Even though she was born into freedom and a loving family, trauma pervades Denver’s being: her traumatic birth during Sethe’s escape; the traumatic return of Schoolteacher and her sister’s murder...” (48). Denver recognizes their isolation from the community is not normal and that there is something wrong with them: “It’s not the house. It’s us! And it’s you!” (*Beloved* 17). Denver is paralyzed by her mother’s actions on one hand and her sister’s on the other. She is suspicious and afraid of the outside world where her mother killed her sister:

All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don't know what it is, I don't know who it is, but maybe there is something terrible enough to make her do it again. I need to know what that thing might be, but I don't want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too. (242)

Denver's interior dialogue reveals how Sethe's traumatic experience has been transmitted to Denver and shapes Denver's own experience. Just as Sethe isolates herself from the dangers of the world she has experienced, Denver is afraid of the outside world even though she has never been outside to experience it. She only knows the world through her mother's experience. Denver is protective of her mother but also fearful that whatever is in the world may cause her mother to kill her too. This fear results in Denver's stunted development and paralysis. She lacks agency as she is suspended between her mother's traumatic past and her dead sister. It is only when Denver realizes that Beloved intends to torture her mother forever that she is compelled to act. Denver recognizes the power Beloved has over her mother and must achieve agency by stepping beyond the yard and into the world to save her mother. This is difficult for Denver as she must look beyond her own trauma and fear of the dangerous world to lean on and become part of the community. The community in the form of the African-American women, who in the beginning had contributed to Sethe's isolation, ultimately return to redeem her. This act allows Denver agency, as she can earn a living and care for her mother. By

the end of the novel, the narrator acknowledges the damaging effects of generational trauma by repeating “This is not a story to pass on” (324).

As a haunting figure, *Beloved* helps characters in the novel connect and reconcile their past with their present. Her presence forces Sethe and Paul D to confront their traumatizing experience of slavery. Morrison hints that these experiences be relived and processed before they can be moved beyond. Sethe and Paul D make genuine attempts to distance themselves from their traumatic pasts and start a new life. For all they have endured, they fail to understand that the past will continue to haunt them until it is confronted. Morrison implies that deep psychological wounds must always be acknowledged and healed, so the ghosts of the past can finally be dispersed.

The character of *Beloved* is perhaps the most intriguing of all Morrison’s characters and becomes a representation of individual and communal trauma. Morrison delicately, and cleverly, posits *Beloved* as the central figure. Even though Sethe is central to the story, she is not the protagonist; *Beloved* is. Morrison makes this clear in the novel’s Foreword:

The figure most central to the story would have to be her [*Beloved*], the murdered, not the murderer, the one who lost everything and had no say in any of it. She could not linger outside; she would have to enter the house. A real house, not a cabin. One with an address, one where former slaves lived on their own... In trying to make the slave experience intimate, I hoped the sense of things being both under control and out of control would be persuasive throughout; that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the



herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive. To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way. (xiix-xix)

Morrison foreshadows her use of the dialectic of trauma and detachment as essential to creating a narrative about enslaved Africans and the willingness to forget and remember. The duality between Beloved's spiritual and physical self serves the author's ultimate purpose to acknowledge and accept all experience as part of life. Beloved is more than one thing. She represents layers of truth and knowing. At first, she appears as a ghost. She is an ominous, bad spirit, which haunts 124 Bluestone Road, causing chaos and scaring Sethe, her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and the children:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims... Counting on the stillness of her own soul, [Sethe] had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage? (3-5)

She is depicted as spirit to be feared and is filled with anger, simmering just below the surface. When Paul D, arrives from the Sweet Home plantation, he comes to see about Sethe and walks through the front door of 124 Bluestone Road:

Through the door straight into a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood.

You got company?", he whispered, frowning.

"Off and on," said Sethe. "Good God".

He backed out of the door onto the porch.

“What kind of evil you got in here?”

“It’s not evil, just sad. Come on. Just step through.” (10)

The ghost of Beloved disappears when Paul D confronts it and orders it out of the house. This exorcism is prophetic in dealing with trauma. Beloved only vanishes when Paul D confronts it, confirming that traumatic pasts must be confronted for them to dissipate.

‘God damn it! Hush up!’ Paul D was shouting, falling, reaching for anchor. “Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!” ... “You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!”

The quaking slowed to an occasional lurch, but Paul D did not stop whipping the table around until everything was rock quiet... The three of them, Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, breathed to the same beat, like one tired person. Another breathing was just as tired. It was gone. (22)

Unfortunately, this particular trauma runs deep and is only momentarily thwarted. Paul D does not get rid of the trauma. He merely pushes it away for awhile. His actions toward traumatic are typical. He wants the tortured spirit to go away but does not recognize its connection to Sethe or the house.

The second form that Beloved takes signifies the transference of trauma from spirit to physical as Beloved is manifested in physical form. Beloved emerges from water as flesh. In the second form, Beloved appears as a human. Her introduction in physical form is revealing:

A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree.

All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim in her straw hat. Everything hurt but her lungs most of all. Sopping wet and breathing shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids. The day breeze blew her dress dry; the night wind wrinkled it. Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by... It took her the whole of the next morning to lift herself from the ground and make her way through the woods past a giant temple of boxwood to the field and then the yard of the slate-gray house. Exhausted again, she sat on the first handy place—a stump not far from the steps of 124. (60)

Beloved's duality of flesh and spirit can be explained within the context of traumatic experience. Beloved as spirit comes to represent psychological trauma, or trauma of the mind. Beloved is connected to the physical world but without form. As the trauma metastasizes, it grows stronger, ultimately becoming real. In other words, trauma is manifested in physical form. It is not unheard of in African and African-American communities to find the spirit and physical world interacting. This phenomenon has its cultural interpretation in the work of the Kenyan scholar, John S. Mbiti, who explains in *African Religions and Philosophy* that:

The spiritual world of African peoples is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits and the living-dead. Their insight of spiritual realities, whether absolute or apparent, is extremely sharp. We have repeatedly emphasized that the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so

much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them. Whatever science may do to prove the existence or non-existence of the spirits, one thing is undeniable, namely that for African peoples the spirits are a reality and a reality which must be reckoned with, whether it is a clear, blurred or confused reality. (74, 89)

The flesh and spirit are connected in the African and African-American community. Morrison uses this motif to show how that connection is affected by trauma. There are two distinct ways Beloved becomes a manifestation of trauma. One way is as a personal trauma. Beloved is the daughter whom Sethe murders with her own hands. As part of Sethe's personal traumatic experience, Beloved is both her torturer and her salvation. Beloved helps Sethe regain a sense of identity by forcing Sethe to face her past. More specifically, Beloved allows Sethe to release her repressed, traumatized memories by prompting her to relate the horrific narratives about the inhumanity, rape, and assault she endures at Sweet Home and about her harrowing escape from Sweet Home. Beloved also permits Sethe to unload her past hurt by explaining her rationale and why she chose to kill Beloved rather than let her be subjected to the horrors of slavery. Ultimately, Beloved helps Sethe face her traumatic past, reconstruct a sense of identity that is not consumed with the past, and articulate the events that occurred within context of a forced environment.

Paul D and Denver also benefit from the presence of Beloved. Paul D rediscovers want and desire in the form of Beloved. Were it not for the threat of Beloved consuming her mother to the point of death, Denver never would have been forced to go outside of the yard and experience the world. Essentially, the trouble that comes in the form of

trauma also comes with solutions. By the end of the novel, Denver is no longer a captive of 124 Bluestone road.

Beloved also comes to represent the communal trauma of the Middle Passage. She embodies the spirit of the many forgotten who must be remembered and acknowledged. The article “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Unspeakable Things Unspoken” by Angela DiPace makes this observation: “The slave trade effected the death, deracination, and abduction of millions of Africans who, boarded like cattle on numerous slavers, were sold at various ports of call. Morrison mourns them in her epigraph/epitaph: ‘Sixty million / and more’” (41). Beloved, ultimately comes to represent the personal death of Sethe’s daughter as well as the communal death of the unrepresented millions of enslaved Africans. In the article “In the Realm of Responsibility,” Morrison makes this clear:

[Beloved] Speaks the language, or traumatized language of her own experience...She tells them what it was like being where she was on that ship as a child. Both things are possible, and there’s evidence in the text so that both things could be approached, because the language of both experiences—death and the Middle Passage—is the same. (185-186)

If the traumatic experience is left unaddressed, it infects and grows in every area of the individual and subsequently the community. Ultimately, the community is unable to render self-narrative and becomes paralyzed and detached from everyone, until there is no more community.

As examined in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, place is where time and experience converge. Morrison again draws the reader’s attention to place and its significance to

traumatic experience in *Beloved*. Two specific places that are central to the story as well as to the traumatic occurrences in *Beloved* are the house Sethe comes to live in on 124 Bluestone Road and Sweet Home—the plantation from which Sethe escapes. Places are an integral part of how the dynamics of trauma are manifested in the community and can be associated with communal trauma. Just as the American South is associated with a specific past, places in this novel are associated with specific occurrences that shape and shatter the characters and communities in the novel. Both places are the site of horrible, unspeakable acts and continuously intrude upon the characters' psyche as fragmented memories. The beginning pages of the novel introduce the reader to the house on 124 Bluestone Road: "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children" (3). Sethe's two sons run away from the house in the first paragraph and Baby Suggs soon after passes away. 124 Bluestone Road is imbued with the ghost of Seth's daughter, and the ghost is a constant intrusion upon Sethe's past that she has not yet confronted. Morrison gives the reader a powerful message in the form of absence. The numbers in the address are sequential, but the number three is missing. Upon further analysis, it could be argued that the number three is absent to draw attention to the disorder in the text. It could also be that the missing number three parallels Sethe's third child, Beloved. Her absence is profound yet unmistakably present.

The house is central to the narrative as it is the place that Beloved haunts and possesses. In the beginning of each of the three sections of the novel, the house is personified as spiteful, loud, and quiet. These adjectives describe also the demeanor of the baby ghost from the beginning to the end of the novel. The house at 124 Bluestone Road was supposed to be a place of safety for Baby Suggs, Sethe, and her children.

Unfortunately, it becomes a place not unlike Sweet Home, filled with damaged characters all struggling with the effects of slavery in one way or another. Although the characters may have escaped the institution of slavery, they do not escape its damaging effects; 124 Bluestone Road becomes the place where Baby Suggs, Sethe, Paul D, and Denver suffer bodily and psychological trauma. The trauma is represented geographically in the sense that the house is physically isolated from the community: “It didn’t have a number then, because Cincinnati didn’t stretch that far” (3). The house is outside of the community. The stories related about the house being haunted deter visitors and deepen the chasm between the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road and the community. Sethe is also socially isolated from the community as they shun her and the haunted house. “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Space, Architecture, Trauma” by Andrew Hock Soon NG posits a connection between Sethe and the house at 124 Bluestone Road:

Sethe’s attribution of the haunting to a “baby ghost” (Morrison 96) reveals an inability to perceive the haunting as relating to herself. This directly results in her failure to recognize who or what Beloved is. Sethe, in other words, is unable to read Beloved properly because the story she furtively allows herself now effectively denies this daughter any existence. No one visits them and very seldom do Denver and Sethe leave the house. (233)

Sethe participates in her own isolation. By attempting to protect Denver from the outside world, the outside world which made her take her own child’s life, Sethe isolates herself and Denver from the community in the process. The house then becomes a place oscillating between protection and isolation. Ultimately, these specific characters are marked, shunned, and left alone to grapple with their pasts in this space, to survive or to

be destroyed at 124 Bluestone Road. The isolation from the community hinders the characters' ability to develop agency and identity outside of their own thoughts and pasts.

Sweet Home, the plantation from which Sethe escapes, is also central to the story as it is the place where so many horrific acts occur. First, Sethe is gang raped by Schoolteacher and his nephews. Second, Halle, her husband, is unable to protect her and abandons her mentally and physically; she is whipped unmercifully leaving the indelible tree-like scarring on her back. Finally, Sweet Home is also the place that separates her from her mother. As Paul D states, "It wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home (*Beloved* 16). For Paul D it is the place where he is reduced to an animal with a bit in his mouth like a horse. This place where so many horrific events occur is forever with Sethe as an active memory:

You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there...Where I was before I came here [Sweet Home], that place is real. It's never going away...The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again it will be there for you, waiting for you. So Denver you can't never go there. Never. (43-44)

Both 124 Bluestone Road and Sweet Home harbor painful events and memories that haunt those who have survived the unspeakable acts deemed too terrible to relate and precipitate the dynamic trauma that ensues. For the reader, Sweet Home is experienced through memories, flashbacks, and the retelling of past events. These re-occurrences



make up the communal traumatic experience that continues to intrude upon the present lives of the characters.

Similar to the Bottom in *Sula*, Sweet Home in *Beloved* carries double meaning as another manifestation of traumatic experience. The name of the plantation—Sweet Home—implies images of safety and nurturing. In the context of this narrative, “Sweet Home” has the exact opposite meaning. There is nothing sweet about “Sweet Home.” Morrison is once again illustrating how traditional meanings are stripped away from words through trauma and redefined causing confusion.

*Beloved* presents dynamic trauma in perhaps its most definitive form of all the novels examined. The various horrific experiences and traumatic effects Sethe suffers, coupled with the 18 years of uninterrupted trauma repeating and growing within Sethe, ultimately culminate in paralysis and detachment from the community, rendering Sethe unable to achieve agency and construct a self-narrative and an identity unbound by her past. The ghost of Beloved is a clear indication of this inability. Beloved’s ghost is a spiritual reminder of Sethe’s past. It haunts the house on Bluestone road, infrequently intruding on the present moment. The ghost symbolizes a willingness to remember and forget the past, as it comes and goes. As Schreiber suggests, “Beloved’s returned presence also provides the space to examine traumatic acts in their social context. Verbalizing Sethe’s extreme act as it relates to the larger cultural circumstances and the limited alternatives available enables Sethe to process her deed and work through her guilt” (50). Because Sethe chooses not to address the past, Beloved’s ghost becomes more pronounced and materializes into physical form. Beloved becomes real. In other words, Sethe’s psychological trauma, left untreated, festers into a physical form; it

becomes dynamic. As a result, Beloved invades every aspect of Sethe's being, inside and out.

Toward the end of the novel, Sethe is bed-ridden and unable to move becoming a shell of her former self. This is a clear representation of dynamic trauma and its damaging effects. It leaves Sethe with no sense of identity outside of the trauma she continues to live and relive. However, with communal support, the past is put in its proper place. By coming to Sethe in her time of need, the community becomes a witness and verbalizes her pain through singing and wailing: "For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of the women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" (308). Beloved disappears. Sethe longs for Beloved, but with the help of Denver, Paul D, and the community, she can engage in rememory and see that she is her best thing and moves beyond the grasp of dynamic trauma.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Morrison's novels pose interesting formulations of trauma that offer representational glimpses of various forms of trauma. By examining trauma in her fictional works, Morrison invites the readers to connect the ideas in her novel to the larger society. In *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, Morrison chronicles historical trauma experienced by African Americans, but she offers more than just an analysis of the past and the damaging effects of trauma in her novels; she also offers ways to negotiate trauma that have damaged agency, caused paralysis, and arrested development in the fictional characters of her novels. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* explains the major elements necessary for recovery from trauma which Morrison seems to incorporate into her novels:

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. (134)

In other words, the individual must be reconnected to the community and it must be one that recreates an empowering narrative instead of one that is viewed as debilitating and self-defeating. In this sense, the word recovery may be a bit misleading because one does not simply recover, or pick up where one left off before the overwhelming event. This particular study suggests that one must seek a new way to reconnect to the past and tell a different story, a story that asserts agency and empowers the individual. An individual is never the same after an experience of overwhelming trauma. For example, a trauma that is experienced because of the death of a loved one highlights the immutable fact that one cannot recover the dead. This type of loss is final. One is forever changed by its occurrence. While the past cannot be changed, the person who can incorporate death into a larger and positive image of self and his or her community is able to forge a lively, developing, connected identity. In other words, if a narrative can be told from a vantage point of authority, the trauma can be negotiated and its effects can be diminished.

In *Sula* dynamic trauma is considerable and renders many of the characters isolated and consumed by their individual experiences. We also see the insidious effects of dynamic trauma when experiences of trauma are left unaddressed, for they negatively affect the community as well. Sula and Nel are fragmented characters by the end of the novel. They are both in pieces and estranged from one another. Both are ultimately alone. Sula dies alone, isolated in her mother's bed with no one to share her experience of death with. And Nel realizes too late as to how important Sula is to her own sense of being. Due to dynamic trauma's pervasive effects, these characters are left detached and

paralyzed in their own trauma; and the trauma consumes them rendering them unable to construct coherent self-narratives, critical to identity formation.

Dynamic trauma is also reflected in the community of the Bottom. At the end of the novel, the community members are isolated in their homes; some attempt to connect to the outside world but die in the tunnel. Because Sula left the community and could experience a bit more than what the Bottom had to offer, she is able to see herself and the community in a different way and creates her own moral code. In this she mirrors Shadrack in attempting to bring chaos to disorder. It may appear that she is ultimately isolated from community, but in being a scapegoat for the community, she serves a vital function for keeping the community together. Sula achieves some semblance of agency through a redefinition of herself by her own values rather than those of the community. Even in her isolated death, she wants to tell her story to Nel: “Sula felt her face smiling. ‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ she thought, ‘it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel’” (149). Although Sula is empowered as she recreates her own identity and tells her own story as one connected to the community, she ultimately has no one to tell her story to. She has no witness. In effect, the novel *Sula*, as well as the character Sula, suffer the effects of dynamic trauma unaddressed. Both are consumed by the dialectic of trauma. The end result is death. Sula dies; the community dies.

In *Song of Solomon*, the character who seems to negotiate trauma rather successfully is Pilate. Although she and her brother Macon Dead Jr. both witness the murder of their father, Pilate negotiates the experience by holding onto the memory of her father, not the death of her father. Her father often speaks to her, and she is

connected to him through the earring she wears. Although she is also viewed as being outside of the community because she has no navel, it is this isolation from the community that facilitates her forming an identity independent of the community that will ultimately become her strength. She achieves agency by constructing an identity on her own. She is self-born and not too concerned with how society values her. She saves Milkman from physical and spiritual death. She drops her last name “Dead” because it does not fit. Although the loss of her father is still present, she narrates a story of how he empowers her rather than becoming psychologically paralyzed by his murder.

Milkman manages to negotiate trauma, and he does achieve some sense of identity. He can fashion his newly found identity into a referential meaning that propels him forward, but due to the ambiguous ending of the novel the reader is unclear to what end? In examining Milkman’s journey to self-discovery, the people close to Milkman have a profound effect on him. Their experiences shape his own. Morrison illustrates the importance of community and its connection to the individual. A critically missing element in the lives of Macon Jr. and Ruth is that no one intercedes on their behalf. They experience trauma and their subsequent isolation is a virtual death sentence. They are left alone with their traumatic experience which consumes them until there is nothing left.

In *Beloved*, Denver is isolated from the community and kept away from the world by Sethe because it is the world that creates the condition that makes her mother commit infanticide. She is doomed to isolation and disconnectedness until she finally goes out into the yard to ultimately take care of herself and her mother who is being tormented by Beloved. She receives help from the community, and the community of women helps in

exorcising the ghost of Beloved. Denver only achieves agency when she decides to move beyond the past and create her own narrative and identity.

Sethe illustrates the destructive forces of dynamic trauma as she is isolated from her community and left alone with her own thoughts of what she has done to her own flesh and blood. The trauma torments her and metastasizes within. Beloved, embodied as spiritual and physical trauma, consumes Sethe almost to the point of death. Fortunately, with the assistance of her community, Sethe can confront her past and move beyond it, and live life as best she can.

Again, one of the primary arguments this study presents is that recovery from trauma is problematic. Sethe can never recover or regain what she has lost. She murders her daughter and cannot bring her back. Sethe will never be the same. However, being able to manage dynamic trauma's debilitating effects means being able to incorporate the past in its proper context into a sense of one continuous, ever-changing narrative of the present. The traumatic experience in Sethe's life finds a proper place when the African-American women become witnesses to Sethe's unspeakable pains and acknowledge them. It is no coincidence that Morrison uses the singing of the African-American women to exorcise Beloved. Here, Morrison uses song as a literary device to represent what cannot be spoken. Language, in its attempt to represent experience, often falls short when it comes to traumatic experience. Song, in the African tradition of hymns and wailing can express, in some instances, more authentically, a traumatic experience. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate lets out a guttural cry for Hagar. Reba and Hagar sing at the funeral. It is the confrontation and acceptance of past events that allow for Sethe to have

a future. Morrison is clearly drawing on African cultural philosophies and traditions in her novels.

Morrison uses the term “rememory” to refer to the act of remembering a memory—to remember a memory in a context that allows one to incorporate the memory into a sense of self without being destructive. The consequence of rememory is that it allows for a new narrative of self and thus, a new way of seeing oneself—a new identity. Rememory allows an individual to confront past experiences. In essence, it allows the individual and the community to confront memories and construct a new narrative. Sethe sees herself as only a mother, and her memories of a traumatic motherhood are all that define her existence. Later, at the end of the novel, Sethe can accept her traumatic experience by identifying and redefining herself as a human within the context of her environment. Overcoming dynamic trauma is achieved when Sethe is reconnected to the community and a sense of self, allowing one to grow and affect her future, moving beyond the paralysis, reconstituting an identity that can incorporate loss into a larger sense of identity. In *Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison’s Beloved* edited by Harold Bloom, Pamela E. Barnett’s essay *Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in Beloved*, illustrate the importance of confronting memories: “Beloved embodies the recurrent experience of the past that the community of women in the novel want to forget... Yet through *Beloved* the women also confront their memories and wounded histories. This attempt to know the incomprehensible trauma done to them is a step toward healing” (197). Clearly, rememory is a necessary element toward reconnecting the community and the individual. Sethe’s individual trauma is also representative of the



communal trauma experienced by many African-American women. This connection allows the individual and the community to share in the pain and in the healing which occurs at the end of the novel.

The sexual violence experienced by Sethe in *Beloved* is another poignant example. Sethe exhibits signs of trauma which include detachment and repetition. She seems to disconnect from reality and is unable to move beyond the horrific experience of rape and thus repeats the line “And they took my milk” (20) three times, as if she is stuck in that moment. Morrison believes that by telling these stories that were once ineffable, and by testifying within a communal context, African Americans might be able to negotiate and move beyond the trauma and the traumatic repercussions of those horrific histories of the past.

These traumatized characters do not simply pick up where they left off before the initial traumatic event occurred. They ultimately must reconnect with the community but from a different perspective. They must see themselves as active agents in their narratives and negotiate the traumatic effects by telling the story anew and doing everything possible to be integrated into the community once again. Throughout these particular novels, Morrison makes it clear how dynamic trauma damages agency and leaves the individual isolated and stunted in development. She illustrates how historical, communal, and individual traumas affect one’s ability to render holistic narratives that shape identity. These traumas fragment experience and detach the individual from communal context. The dialects of trauma create a state of paralysis between two opposing ideals. Trauma damages agency because it overwhelms an individual’s sense

of autonomy and sense of self. Whether it is Eva Piece, Macon Dead Jr., or Sethe, these characters are riddled with the effects of trauma. The past continuously resurfaces in their lives obstructing their views of themselves and their subsequent futures. When these traumas are unaddressed and allowed to metastasize, they invade and permeate the individual psychologically, physically, as well as emotionally. For many of Morrison's characters, these traumas leave them isolated and disconnected from themselves and their community.

As one examines the structure of Morrison's novels, trauma theory and the theory of new historicism play significant roles in explaining the development of these trauma narratives. Morrison captures vividly not only the influence of particular historical narratives on people, but she also illustrates how people can influence historical narrative. Her ability to represent the interior life of an historical group offers insights that otherwise had not been illuminated. The act of telling stories becomes not only an attempt to heal the human psyche from traumatic experience but to assert agency where little perhaps existed, and to construct identity. In each of her novels, the characters relate fragmented narratives. They are characters who have endured or witnessed excruciating traumatic experiences. By reading about the traumatic experiences, the reader is also participating as a witness to trauma, and to some extent the trauma can enter the reader's psyche. Morrison is keenly aware that the novels she constructs may produce such an effect. Morrison's purpose is to have the reader acknowledge these experiences and accept them as part of one's communal history. It is left to the reader to piece the story together and experience the trauma through the structure of the novel and

the characters' perspective. Without acknowledgement and acceptance, dynamic trauma infects every area of the individual psychologically, physically, and emotionally to the point that the individual cannot render a narrative truly reflective of self. The ability to render narrative reflective of the self is critical to identity construction for the characters as well as readers.

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